ONE OF US IS A MURDERER

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BOOKS BY

ALAN LE MAY

PAINTED PONIES

OLD FATHER OF WATERS

PELICAN COAST

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Six men and two women trapped in a tropic clearing — and one of them was a murderer!

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CHAPTER I

Up on one elbow, listening in the dark, I slowly achieved relaxation once more; and as my brain cleared a little from the fogs of sleep I silently swore at myself for the restlessness which, a dozen times lately, had jerked me broad awake, and set me listening to the tropic night.

Never have I heard South America more still. Almost you could hear the slow river flowing under the heat. But though not a leaf stirred, nor a breath of air, I felt that all the night jungle was awake and listening as I listened, tense in the dark. Presently, a long way up the black Rio Estrago, a jaguar voiced a deep coughing snarl, once, and then no more. Doggedly I lowered my cheek to the hot sheet.

Instantly a galvanizing snap of nerves brought me up again. Stealthily, but very definitely, the screen of my window had lowered against its sill—a faint sound, but unmistakable. I struck up my mosquito net.

Being under a mosquito net in the dark is like being

inside a cloud. Then as you lift the net the room outside appears unexpectedly dark, but unexpectedly distinct too, like reality after a dream. I could see clearly the dim square of the window, and the gray shape of the net-shrouded bed where Buckner Loftus slept, against the other wall of our narrow room. At first, however, that was all. I was about to drop my net about me in disgust.

Then, against the dim ghostly blur of Loftus's net a dark shape moved.

In height that dark mass could hardly have been waist high to a man: a shapeless form, except for an arched curve of back, distinct against the half-seen background of the net. It could have been a tapir, if a tapir could appear suddenly within a man's room on soundless feet; or it could have been a crouching man.

Swiftly the silhouetted shape moved across the cone of my vision, seeming to sway irregularly as it ran. It was very close—Loftus's bed was no more than five feet from my own, and what I saw was between—yet I heard no sound, not even the creak of a board in a house in which all boards creaked at the least excuse, or with none.

As the shadow passed out of my sight I shot out an

arm and made a grab at it; but my hand closed on air, and my fingernails bit so hard into my palm that I thought for an instant I had caught something. In the main room off which the narrow bedroom opened, a board squeaked once, reassuring me that my eyes had not lied.

Immediately I jerked on the white duck trousers that I kept at my side—you don't sleep in pajamas in the heat of the equator—and swung out of bed, whipping free of the net. A loose board under my feet sent a dismal squall through that poorly built, climate-racked house. My flashlight was on a chair beside me, and I snatched it up as I stepped to the door of the room.

Someone was moving toward me down the length of the main room, his soft footfalls plainly audible upon the complaining floor. I snapped the flash in the direction of the unseen approach, and was disappointed to catch nothing more mysterious than the huge figure of Buckner Loftus, naked to the waist as was I. Instantly I swept the flash around the whole of the main room, over the musty reed furniture, the decaying grass matting, the netted cot where Phil Heneshaw was sleeping. Except for Buckner Loftus, I found nothing but the surging

shadows of the forlorn still furniture, and empty doors.

"What you doing?" Loftus grumbled sleepily. He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist.

"Have you been out doors?" I asked him sharply.

Buckner Loftus was another geologist, a youngster at the game, like myself. But though chance had made us temporary roommates here, no particular warmth had marked our acquaintance. Loftus had an overbearing swagger about him, apparently derived from his enormous physical strength. And I think it annoyed him that I had three years' experience in the tropics, having come there immediately after my discharge in 1919, whereas he had behind him only a single survey somewhere in Yucatan.

"No, I haven't been out doors," he growled. "I've been to the water cooler to get a drink, and what the hell is it to you?"

"Heneshaw! Are you awake?" I switched my light to the net-shrouded cot on the other side of the room.

The light failed to penetrate the blank white wall of the mosquito net, so that at first I thought the man was gone. In a moment, however, the spring of the cot squawked, the net billowed erratically,

and he got to his feet long enough to flounder drowsily out of the net.

Phil Heneshaw was our host, being manager of the Estrago station of Far Rivers Mahogany, Inc. Except for his wife, whom he should never have brought there, he was also the sole white resident of this useless and inaccessible post; for to all practical purposes Far Rivers Mahogany seemed to be defunct. An old-maidish, disappointed man, looking much older than his fifty-odd years.

"What's the matter?" he demanded irritably, sitting down again on the cot's edge. The spring of his cot popped like a little pistol.

"Did you hear anyone come into this room?" I asked.

"When?"

"Right now!"

"Who?"

Exasperated, I turned to Buckner Loftus. "And you? You were at the water cooler, you say. Did you hear anyone come in here just before I flashed my light?"

"Heck no! What's the matter with you?"

"You didn't hear a door open and close, or a board squeak?"

"Sure, boards squeaked! Probably you squeaked them yourself, you damn fool. Get out of the way—I'm going to bed."

"Somebody—or something," I said, "has come into this house that doesn't belong in here. I'm going to know who and why." I told them what I had seen.

"This is queer—very queer," said Heneshaw. "Are you *sure* you didn't imagine this?" He had the dazed, haggard look peculiar to aging men who have been startled out of their sleep. The lank gray hair that he brushed over his bald spot was dangling in his eyes, giving him a look of dishevelment very unusual to him, who was always so neat and so precise.

"You birds have been in the tropics too long," grunted Loftus. He went hulking back to his bed, and we heard his wooden cot groan under his great frame.

Of the seven doors leading from that room, three were open, besides my own. The bungalow's one main room ran clear through the house, opening on both front and rear galleries, and since the galleries were screened, the doors to them were never shut. The other open door ventilated the room shared by Doc Harmon and Charley Walker. Quickly I went first to

the front gallery, and then to the rear, exploring them with my light. Both of the outside screen doors were unhooked; but though the hinges were well oiled I thought that I would have heard them open and close, had anyone gone out by these ways.

When I came back into the main room old Heneshaw was rubbing his eyes with thumb and finger.

"I think this is all nonsense," he said testily.

"Someone has come prowling into this house—and is in it yet," I insisted.

"Harry Blackburn is the only one of us who hasn't been in the house all the time," he grumbled. "There's no one else within sixty miles—except a few timorous Indian servants. I'm going back to sleep."

Deliberately I laid my flashlight on the table and lit one of the kerosene lamps. I heard Doc Harmon roll his obese bulk, and simultaneously begin a gentle snoring. From the same room Charley Walker's voice sung out gruffly:

"What's going on out there?"

"That's exactly what I want to know."

"How about less noise?"

It looked as if I was going to make my investigations alone. At this point, however, Jane Corliss quietly joined me, and at the first sound of her voice Loftus

was up again and among us. She was wearing a flimsy blue dressing gown, or whatever you call it, that brought out the blue of her eyes, which was like Caribbean waters; and she looked freshly awake and cool, in contrast to our own bleary sleepiness. Only, the brief smile which she flashed at Buck Loftus, and then impartially at me, seemed somehow wan and strained.

"If this isn't the most awful night!" she said. "Has anything happened?"

"Macgregor saw a spook," Loftus boomed in his big patronizing voice. "What's the matter, kid? Can't you sleep?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jane apologized. "But I keep imagining I hear the most ghastly noise . . ."

"What kind of a noise?"

"Oh—an awful, strangling sort of noise, out in the clearing. I suppose it's only peccaries, or something. Only, I keep thinking I can almost distinguish *words*."

"Do you hear it now? Listen a minute."

We stood silent. Even Doc Harmon's snoring had ceased, and nothing moved anywhere in that God-forsaken house under the tropic heat. Besides the three of us that stood there in the lamplight, there

were four people sleeping in the house that night; and now I had a curious feeling that everyone in that house was lying rigidly awake, listening.

"No," said Jane at last, "I think—I think it's stopped." The faintest suggestion of a quiver had come into her voice, and instantly anger swept me that anything had been permitted, even for a moment, to worry this girl.

"I'm going out and talk to Harry Blackburn," I said, picking up my flash. Harry Blackburn, who had just completed six weeks' geologic exploration in the jungle, had declined to sleep in the rather crowded house, preferring to swing his net and hammock in the open.

"Me too," Loftus decided abruptly.

"Then," said Jane, "I'm going with you. I can't stand this house another minute!"

"We'll fix it, kid," said Loftus. He dropped a casual heavy arm across her shoulders, and chuckled when she moved away from him.

Pale moonlight lay with an almost palpable weight upon that forlorn house in the jungle. A banana plantation had been attempted here by a German firm, and the jungle had been pushed back a few hundred yards; but the war had stopped the project, and the

jungle was returning fast. Seventy paces from the house now rose an impenetrable front of cecropia and bamboo, above which you could still see the ragged heads of the choked bananas. A hundred yards to our right as we crossed the clearing toward Blackburn's hammock ran the Rio Estrago, its silent ebony waters untouched by mist. And all around us beyond the bamboo rose the older jungle, a black wall a hundred feet tall, solid as a cliff in that little light.

To me it was incredible that Jane Corliss was walking beside me in that jungle clearing. Dan Corliss had chosen to leave his daughter here with the Heneshaws while he went on some undefined errand into the jungle. He had known Phil and Lucretia Heneshaw for a long time, and since Dan Corliss was all the family Jane had, I suppose he wanted to keep her as near him as he could. Since I had first met Jane in Colón, a year before, I had thought of her many and many a time while pacing alone under that same tropic moon; but now that she was here, well within the borders of that dark jungle, I found it hard to believe in her actuality.

"This is all foolishness, of course," said Buckner Loftus. He grinned down at Jane possessively.

As for me, I did not smile yet. Ahead of us, where Harry Blackburn's net hung between two gaunt trees at the edge of the bamboo, I had already seen something I did not like. That mosquito net was open; and the black vertical gap in its side was no normal opening, for those nets open only at the bottom.

"Jane," said I, "you'd better go back." Later I wondered if she remembered a strain in my voice, before it was noticed that anything was wrong.

"I'd rather stay with you."

"What the——" growled Buck Loftus. He suddenly strode ahead, and thrust head and shoulders through the gap in Harry Blackburn's net. I studied him as he turned and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"He ain't in it," said Buck. "Funny. This net's been cut wide open, with a knife."

He stood up, and ran a quick eye around the whole moonlit circumference of the clearing. Seventy paces beyond us the cottage lay small and dingy under the moon, looking unspeakably ancient and deserted. A little distance farther stood the decaying grass huts where once had lived the native laborers who had planted bananas; a handful of Indians—house boys and their families—lived there now. The

rest of the clearing within the bamboo lay open, its flat floor clogged only by a short ragged grass.

My flashlight, as I snapped it on, made a bright disc on the ground, turning the moonlight dull. At our feet the grass showed the trampled trail we had followed from the house; it was the same trail that Blackburn had already tramped down, while making the innumerable trips back and forth that are required by a fussy man who is establishing himself for the night. No other trail showed, leading to or from the hammock, until I lowered the flashlight to the level of the grass. You get a cross-shadow that way, that shows up little things; and we instantly made out another trail—a light twisting mark perhaps only once or twice traversed, for the bent grasses were rising again.

I let the bright circle of light follow the twisting mark slowly, foot by foot. The trail was easy enough to see, once you knew it was there, and which way it went.

How that deceptive moonlight can hide things from you, even when you are very close! Twenty feet from the hammock Harry Blackburn lay, crumpled in the grass.

I struck out a hand to restrain Loftus. Even then I

knew that we should approach that quiet figure some other way than by the mark in the grass that led to it.

That trail was going to need to be read. But before I could catch his arm he had leaped ahead, and was crouching by the still form; and Jane, following him, was at his side.

Loftus stood up slowly, the swagger gone out of his immense shoulders. As he looked from one to the other of us, all the naturalness went out of that still moonlit clearing and I think more than one of us suddenly felt that the encircling jungle was pressing us close against the black river, as if we stood exposed to all evil in a trap that had closed.

There was no need for Loftus's booming voice, for we knew what he was going to say before he spoke: "He—he's dead."

I looked at my watch: it was two-fourteen.

CHAPTER II

"Old Immunity," mumbled Buck Loftus. "Just as he gets back to so-called civilization again—he gets his. . . . Old Immunity!"

Buckner Loftus was the only one who called Harry Blackburn Old Immunity. It was true that Blackburn had been uncommonly immune to fever, and those other tropic ailments that have always been the chief weapons of the South American jungle in holding back the white frontier. But he was not old; a young man of twenty-three, quiet to the point of being dull company, and very serious-minded and wrapped up in his work.

A certain irritation, perhaps, was behind that mocking nickname Buck had applied to him. Harry Blackburn had been immune to a lot of things besides disease. He had been immune to any comprehension of danger, or any awareness of the exotic atmosphere of the tropics, which has always made such an impression on the other exiled young men. If he reacted to anything but geology, I don't know what it was.

I can see him yet, an inoffensive, middle-sized young man whose steel-rimmed glasses made a red mark across his perpetually peeling nose, and whose plump cheeks the tropics could not gaunt. He walked through the heart of tropic jungles in a weathered Panama hat, set too high on his head, and cloth puttees which wrapped baggy trouser legs in clumsy bunches about his ankles. And he held the irritating theory that no one who took proper care of himself ever became diseased.

And now—all those out-of-place effects of his were over with, finished.

"Old Immunity," said Loftus again; "just back to so-called civilization."

Jane bit her lips, half suppressing a long quivering sigh. I pressed her hand for a second, and found it cold and trembly.

Loftus and I carried Harry Blackburn into the house, clumping heavily over the sounding floors, and laid him on Buck's bed. Then Buck's voice roared, reverberating through the house:

"All right, you birds! Come out of it! Something's happened here!"

Heneshaw came floundering out of his net again, full of sleepy questions, and very sketchily clothed.

Suddenly he noticed that Jane Corliss was in the room; and he modestly dived back under his mosquito cloth, from whose foggy concealment he did not again emerge until he was full dressed.

When I had lit two more lamps I had a moment in which to run an eye around the main room, a worn-out looking place, not overly large. The walls, like the whole construction of the house, were of the cheapest wood obtainable there—which happened to be excellent mahogany, poorly finished, and now warped and discolored with the damp.

Half a dozen sad-looking reed chairs, a roll-top desk at which Heneshaw transacted his mostly imaginary business, a table, a phonograph stand, a water cooler, Heneshaw's net-draped cot, a shelf with a few moldy books and a wooden figure carved by the Choco—every detail seemed to be just as I had last seen it the evening before. Only—something on the book shelf did not look just as I had expected. At first, however, I could not decide what this was.

What had moved through the bedroom, between Buck's cot and mine, its feet silent on that creaky floor? Where had it gone? At front and rear of that main room were the doors opening onto the broad galleries. In the left wall of the room, as you entered

from the front, were two doors: one opening into the room where slept Lucretia Heneshaw, Phil's wife; the other into the room where Doc Harmon and Charley Walker were now sleepily blundering about, trying to get dressed.

On the right were the doors of three rooms. First, the corner room which Jane occupied; then a small windowless store room; and finally, at the rear, the room I shared with Buckner Loftus.

I had seen a crouching figure enter this main room. By one of these doors it had evidently made its exit. Presumably it had not used the gallery doors; rushing into the house then directly out again—what would have been the sense to that? I went to Lucretia Heneshaw's door, and called to her through the panels.

"Mrs. Heneshaw—are you all right?"

"Ye-es!" A tone of ill-natured irritation.

Crossing the room, I thrust open the door of the store room. The lamplight pushed reluctantly into the black windowless closet, showing crates, boxes, a floor covered with dust. Nothing had entered here.

Buck Loftus now walked out of our room, where he had laid Blackburn, and stood close in front of me. His big shoulders stooped a little: he was accustomed

to talking down to people in that overbearing way he liked. Some of the antagonism between Buck and me may have arisen from the fact that I was too tall for him to talk down to. He was much the more powerful man, but he had to straighten up to look me in the eye, just the same.

"Did you notice the color of Blackburn's skin?" he asked in his heavy undertone.

I nodded.

"Black as your hat," he muttered.

"Poison—or strangulation," I said.

"Poison," he said dogmatically. "There's a blow-gun dart under his right ear."

"I saw it."

As I studied the room again, still thinking of little except that crouching form that had passed so near me in the dark, Flatfoot Charley Walker appeared at the door of the room he shared with Doc Harmon. He stood buttoning his shirt in the shadow; and I had a swift impression that he had been watching me for several moments as my eyes traveled the room. He came out now.

He had said he was a rubber buyer, this Walker. This was peculiar, for at that time there was no rubber production, to amount to anything, in the Choco.

Still, I knew he might have been telling the truth. There aren't many places that harbor as many useless comings and goings, in proportion to almost no population, as the Caribbean coast.

Walker looked like nothing so much as a New York harness bull very recently shifted over into the plain-clothes division. When he wore a Panama hat he contrived to give it a chunky look, so that it had the effect of an iron derby. His shirts were loudly striped, his clothes dark and weighty-looking. He had big, hard-looking pads of cheeks, which deprived him of all expression; insolent, unreadable black eyes, with the whites showing beneath, and a small, thick-lipped mouth which in its typical state clamped a cigar butt in one drawn-down corner.

"Blackburn's got a blowgun dart under the ear," I told him.

"All up?"

"Yes."

Doc Harmon, the fat driller, now appeared behind him. Harmon's presence here was better accounted for: he was here to meet Blackburn, having been sent by the Laguna Oil Company which employed them both. For two weeks he had been waiting for Blackburn to return from the jungle. He was a

blowsy, paunchy man, red-eyed and puffy, with purple jowls.

"You don't mean he's——" Harmon wheezed.

"Dead as a flounder," said Loftus.

Walker took a lamp into the bedroom where Blackburn lay. Heneshaw and Harmon followed him, but these two were not in there very long.

"He can't have been dead more than fifteen minutes; less maybe," Harmon said. He always tried to live up to the "Doc"—or perhaps he had earned the nickname that way.

Flatfoot Charley Walker was the last out. Afterward I wished that I had been with him; or at least noticed exactly how long he had been in that room with Harry Blackburn, alone. When he came out he had the dart in his fingers, and stood testing the point with his thumb. The little weapon looked innocent enough: a polished sliver three inches long, with a tuft of downy feathers at the blunt end, was all it was.

Now I took the time to make an examination of my own. Three minutes convinced me that there was nothing further I could learn in this way. When I returned to the main room Heneshaw was speaking in a dry, unsteady voice.

"He paid off his canoe boys yesterday. Up river Indians, every one of them. A treacherous breed. Evidently one of them crept back, and shot from the cover of the bamboo; a finger hole would have let the dart into the net. And a stalking Choco buck could touch the net, where Blackburn had it, without leaving the cover of——"

"He shot from the clearing side," I said.

"Why?" said Walker.

"Because," I said, "Blackburn always slept on his back; he thought it was a more healthful position. His head was to the east."

"How do you know?" Walker snapped so abruptly that I looked him over before I answered.

"I looked into the net; his canvas coat was rolled up and laid in the east end of the hammock. I don't suppose he put it there as a pillow for his feet. The wound is on the right side, which would have been toward the clearing."

"The body was found in the hammock?" asked Heneshaw.

"Twenty or thirty feet away," said Loftus.

"Then—he must have been shot outside his hammock!"

"Then who ripped the net?" I asked. "It's ripped

wide open—with a knife—on the clearing side. The dart could have been put in through a finger hole, as you say."

"You can't account for what one of those Chocos will do," said Heneshaw vaguely.

At this point Mrs. Heneshaw joined us. She, for one, showed no trace of sleep. There were dark smudges under her eyes, but these were always there, giving her eyes a tragic look contradicted by the sharp petulance of her features. She must have been in her thirties—much younger than her husband certainly. But she looked much older than she was, with her skin roughened and darkened by the punishing tropic heat, which she and Phil had now endured together for some years.

"It seems, dear," said Phil Heneshaw gropingly, "that Harry Blackburn has met with a——"

"I've heard everything that's been said," said Lucretia irritably. "You don't have to repeat it all."

Walker was staring at me again with those blank black eyes. The cigar butt had reappeared in the corner of his small crooked mouth.

"You notice quite a lot, don't you?" he said to me.

I took a chance. "What were you doing in my room at two-ten?" I asked him.

"What's this now?" Walker demanded.

Everyone was looking at me now, and there was a silence; but Walker stood fast, without sign of any kind, and my eyes could not bear his down. I repeated my story about the silent figure that had gone through my room.

"It was just before that——" said Jane suddenly; then caught herself.

"What is it, kid?" Loftus prompted her.

Jane Corliss was silent.

Walker put on a great air of frankness. "Folks—" he might have been a politician, a ward heeler smoothing out recalcitrant votes—"folks, I think we need to lay our cards on the table here. I think we each one of us has got to tell what he knows about what's going on here to-night. All right, Janey—what was it, now?"

"Who told you to call Miss Corliss 'Janey'?" I exploded.

He let me have a long stare. "Miss Corliss, then. This isn't no time to get snooty, is it?"

Heneshaw broke in. Now that he seemed fully awake he was himself once more—just a shabby, gentlemanly old chap, tired and discouraged, but hospitable still, as we were accustomed to know him.

"Why are we all on edge?" he remonstrated. "Mr. Macgregor possibly imagined a shadow. Don't you think you might have, Joe? This tragedy has unnerved us all. We are all greatly shocked that this terrible thing has happened to a friend who was very dear to some of us. But after all, what hope is there of learning anything about an unseen native——"

"Harry Blackburn," Walker interrupted heavily, "wasn't bumped by no native."

He dropped his voice. His flat expanse of cheek, his small arrogantly pouched mouth, were unchanged. But though his eyes were expressionless too, I have never seen a more baleful stare than Walker's as he let his eyes go slowly from one to another. "Blackburn was killed *by somebody in this house tonight.*"

From Lucretia Heneshaw there broke a sharp, breathy little cry. Then she clapped the back of her hand to her mouth, so that all we could see was her horrified eyes, with those tragic black smudges under them.

"You think——" boomed Loftus.

"I know."

"Oh, you know something yourself, do you?" Doc Harmon, the fat driller, broke out irascibly.

"I'll say I do."

I almost grinned at the rubber buyer, there was such a slow theatrical menace in his voice. I wished, though, that I could better read those slow black eyes.

"I know," he repeated.

CHAPTER III

In that awkward silence it seemed to me that the room was extremely full of people. Only four of us, besides Jane and the Heneshaws, could hardly be called a crowd under ordinary conditions; but at this remote house of mahogany it was an extraordinary assemblage. Fortuitous of course. Or was it?

I checked over the group. Phil Heneshaw and his wife, of course, were always there. Jane had been left with them by her father, a month before, when he had gone into the jungle on an errand known only to himself.

Then there was the group of three who had arrived here two weeks ago on the Laguna launch, which brought supplies fortnightly. These three were Buckner Loftus, that young giant, sent here by an independent company to make an upriver reconnaissance; Doc Harmon, the fat driller, sent here to meet Blackburn, for consultation purposes; and Charley Walker, called Flatfoot, who had come here to look over the rubber situation. Loftus had delayed his plunge into

the jungle, wishing to see what tips he could get from Blackburn, whose return had been overdue. Jane's presence had no doubt influenced Loftus in this. And Walker had remained two weeks because he had to wait for the Laguna launch.

Finally there was myself, who had flown from Cartagena for no reason but to see Jane. I had arrived two days before in the float-rigged Jenny with which I had been doing free-lance aërial photography. Poor Harry Blackburn had been the eighth, arriving last of all, sunburned and weary from his three months' survey in the untamed interior.

Each of us, I had to admit, had his own valid reason for being here.

Loftus broke the silence. He seemed both impatient and unimpressed. "Well," he addressed Walker, "come out with it! Are you going to give us your dope or not?"

"Not," said Walker. "I'm not going to tell you how I know until I can tell you who."

"You seem to have taken charge here," said Doc Harmon with irritation.

"Somebody needs to."

"Just who are you?" the fat driller demanded. "Rubber business teach you to act like a boss cop?"

"There's all kind of angles," said Walker, "to rubber buying."

"I think——" began Phil Heneshaw.

Walker disregarded him. "Now, I want to know this: *Who took the head off that wood god there on the shelf?*"

Everyone's eyes turned to the shelf. I know, because mine did not turn. I was looking at the faces of the rest, instead. Loftus's eyes went to the shelf with a quick flick, Lucretia's glance was quick and waspish. Heneshaw's eyes rose a trifle more slowly, and I made a note of that.

One pair of eyes did not turn: Flatfoot Charley Walker was looking about him as was I, and it was on my face that his eyes came to rest.

"You didn't look to see if I was right," he said in a flat voice. "You already knew that was gone, huh?"

"Yes, I knew it," I said.

"Just how long have you known it?" he asked heavily.

"About five minutes." This was not the time to anger. "I have eyes," I reminded him; "perhaps not as good as yours—but eyes."

The glance he laid upon me, before his heavy gaze

twitched to Heneshaw, contained nothing I could read.

"Let us not be foolish, gentlemen," said Phil Heneshaw with patient weariness. "We are too nervous here, all of us. What connection can there be if the house boy stole a——"

"Since midnight?" said Walker sarcastically. "I tell you, I use my eyes. I notice things. And I know damned well that wood gadget had its head on it at midnight, when I blew out the light."

"You couldn't have mistaken——"

"Certainly not!"

"No," I put in, "he's not mistaken."

Harmon laughed, a nervous cackle. "Next time you'll have it that this wood head was hollow, and there was jewels in it—the eye of the idol probably!"

"No, that's just what's funny about it," I said. "I know all about that wood god, because I brought it out of the jungle myself, when I was up the river last year. To begin with, it isn't a god, but just a common wood doll, such as the Chocos make for their kids. The head was fitted on, so that it would turn; but it was just a solid piece of wood, about half again as big as a golf ball."

"Someone could have hollowed out——" Harmon speculated.

"Rubbish! I was showing the doll—or god, as you call it—to Miss Corliss to-night, and showed her how the head was fitted on."

Jane murmured, "That's true—it wasn't hollow."

"And you're sure you put the head back?"

"He put the head back," said Jane softly.

"I think you're all crazy people," said Doc Harmon. His gray face made mockery of his words.

Walker hoisted himself to a seat on the table. Idly he took a knife from his pocket and began whittling at a match stick.

"Now, Janey—Miss Corliss," said he, "you were starting to tell us something that you noticed, just after two o'clock."

Her blue eyes regarded him uncertainly; she was very pale. I got a chair for her, and made her sit down.

"I'm waiting, Miss Corliss!" said Walker sharply.

"It was nothing," Jane said unsteadily; "except, that noise stopped, just then."

"What noise?"

"I had been hearing an awful, strangling sort of sound. It didn't sound a bit human, except—sometimes I thought there were words in it, though I couldn't understand what they were."

"You didn't," said Walker almost pleadingly, "catch even one word?"

"No, I'm sure of that. That noise—I thought it was some animal—there are so many jungle noises, sometimes, at night. It kept me awake for almost an hour. Then at last it stopped."

"Died away—huh?"

"No—stopped abruptly, just as if it was choked off."

"This was just after two o'clock?"

"Yes—Joe and Buck Loftus got up and lit the lamp within five minutes after that. I saw the line of light under my door. And their voices sounded as if something had happened, so I got up."

Turning my eyes to the others as she finished, I was struck by a sudden disgust with them all. Of the seven of us in the house of mahogany, Jane alone looked cleanly and beautifully made, so that she made all the others look cheap, and gross.

"You'll notice," I said, "that that final choke-off was timed exactly to fit what I saw—the crouching man that came in through the window of my room."

"If any," Harmon grumbled under his breath.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean it sounds pretty impossible," he said aloud. "That's what I mean!"

"If a search of the house would do any good——" Heneshaw began.

"It would not," said Walker through his ragged cigar. "Blackburn's murderer is in this room. One of us went out of this house after midnight—and returned after the death of Blackburn. Macgregor's story seems to be true—so far as it goes."

"You mean one of us went out and——"

"I can go further than that," said Walker. "I heard the man leave the house; and it was about one o'clock in the morning. Now, if one of you wants to admit going out of here at one, and try an alibi on top of it, this is the time for it! Speak up, whoever you are, if you're going to!"

No one did. In the silence Buck Loftus drummed heavy fingers on the table, his nails making a clicking tattoo.

"Now, Miss Corliss," our officious rubber buyer went on after a moment: "your window opens on the front gallery. You say you wasn't sleeping so good. Maybe you heard him, when he went out."

"I heard him," said Jane almost inaudibly.

"Maybe—you saw him."

Jane's eyes were wide, and fixed almost hypnotically on Walker's expressionless face. We could hardly hear her as she said: "Yes—I saw him."

"*Who was it?*"

"I don't know!" The words seemed to burst from her, as if the horror of the night had gripped her by the throat.

"You go easy," I growled at Walker.

He flicked me a glance, and his manner changed. He spoke gently, for him, and his eyes studied his cigar, instead of boring into her face.

"You saw him, and yet you don't know who he was?"

"I only saw the outline of a shoulder and a head, as he tiptoed across the porch," said Jane jerkily; and I would have given everything I owned to have had her a thousand miles out of that jungle, and that night.

"And then?" Walker persisted.

"I turned my face to the wall."

Heneshaw broke in unexpectedly. "Then you don't know whether or not that man left the gallery?" he asked.

"No."

"Did you hear the man come back in?" Walker asked.

"I—I think I did. That is, I heard someone tiptoeing back across the gallery and into the house."

"Personally," Walker explained, "I went to sleep, I suppose. I never heard him come back. How much later was it?"

"Perhaps two minutes—perhaps longer."

"And all this was after that strangling sound began, or before?"

"Before—or maybe it was almost the same time."

"And that," said Walker, "seems to be the time this murder was begun. Now, Miss Corliss——"

"Meantime," I snapped at the rubber buyer, "you want us to believe you went sound asleep in the course of two minutes!"

"Or maybe, as she says, it was longer," he answered imperturbably. "Now look here, Miss Corliss: I mean to know——"

"I think," I interrupted him, "some coffee will do us good, now. You've pushed this far enough for now, Flatfoot!"

"There's one thing," he said, "that we must do to-night—at once; because we will never be able to do it as well again. Miss Corliss, I am going to ask

you to go to your room, and take the position you were in when you saw that man. You had better go with her, Mrs. Heneshaw—I want no hysterics when we put out the lights."

"Put out the lights?"

"I am going to ask," said Walker, "that each of you men pussyfoot across that porch in the dark, while Miss Corliss watches. Maybe then she'll catch which one it was."

Astonishingly, Doc Harmon rapped the table with his knuckles. "A good idea!" he exclaimed. It was the first time he had shown anything but antagonism toward the rubber buyer who had shared his room, and Walker looked at him curiously.

"A very good plan," said Buckner Loftus more slowly.

"Oh, please——" began Jane.

"You look here," I demanded, angering. "You've bothered Jane Corliss enough, you hear?"

Walker snapped shut his knife and put it away.

"You have a reason," said he, "for not wanting to make this investigation?"

"I certainly have!"

"In that case," said Walker, "perhaps after all it ain't necessary to——"

"I'll do it," said Jane unexpectedly.

Walker said to me, slowly, "You're a lucky man, in a way, Macgregor; but you're smart, and you're right about something: that there'd be no protection at all in any concealment of the facts by a woman."

"You mean——" I began, swaying forward in spite of myself.

Jane cried out, "Joe, don't!" and the steam went out of me.

"Are there any other objections?" Walker asked.

"We're ready, I think," I said.

Just before the lamps were put out in that musty room my eyes once more took in every detail: the positions of the chairs, the lamps, the thousand little things that any lived-in room contains—for I was looking to see if a weapon was ready to hand, a weapon that someone in that room might seize and use in the dark.

Jane turned to her room; and after a moment's hesitation Lucretia Heneshaw followed her.

"Are you ready, Miss Corliss?"

From the room at the corner of the house where she had slept, or tried to sleep, we heard Jane murmur something; then Lucretia's creaky voice called out, "Yes, go ahead!"

"Gentlemen," said Walker harshly, "let's stand together, over here by the door. No shenanigans, now, you! I'll go first; then one of you after another—plenty slow, too! You get that? Or we'll do it over, that's all. Set?"

He blew out two of the lamps; the other was in his hand.

Loftus, Heneshaw, Harmon, and I gathered rather sheepishly in a group by the door. I was scowling from one to another of them, well out of patience with the trial Jane was being put through to what I was sure was no purpose. The others did not meet my eye, nor one another's. It is a curious thing to stand in a group of five men, and think: "Perhaps one of us here has killed a man, to-night. . . ."

Walker set the lamp on the talking machine, which was handy to the door. "Ready?" He blew out the light.

A smell of smoldery kerosene wick assailed our nostrils, and slowly we became partly visible to each other again as our eyes adjusted to the indirect radiance of the moon. Instinctively, as the darkness closed upon us, I drew a little apart from the others. A hard ugly suspicion was upon me that Walker was entirely right, and there was no man there whose

company I preferred to my own in that sudden dark. Some such feeling must have been upon the others, for they stirred uneasily, drawing apart. As the group lost its unity the individual figures became indistinct, dimly shifting in the obscurity of the shadows. Later I could not swear who had stood where, nor for how long, during those minutes that the lamps were extinguished.

"Here we go," Walker mumbled through his cigar.

"I still don't see any sense——" said Heneshaw fretfully.

"Shut up, you!"

Walker tiptoed clumsily across the front gallery, his hands in his pockets. At the edge of the gallery he paused, and swung his shoulders slowly, conscientiously duplicating the probable silhouetted angles of the unknown one among us whom Jane Corliss was trying to identify. Then he turned, and came back.

"All right, you—next! Do just like I done."

He nudged Buck Loftus, and Buck imitated the rubber buyer's actions with such exact mimicry that it might have been the same man again, somewhat increased in size.

"Funny, ain't you?" Walker growled at him when he was back.

"A real screech," Loftus agreed.

"Next."

Not in my life have I watched a stranger performance than the one we gave as we tiptoed one after another across that shadowy gallery. Our movements were stiff and unnatural, as if we were mechanical men. I had a feeling that we were being badgered and mocked by something bigger than ourselves, something of and from the jungle, which was amusing itself by putting us through paces unnatural and insane.

I went next to last, and Heneshaw last of all. More than one deep breath was drawn as the kerosene lamps once more swelled into light.

"All right, ladies," said Walker peremptorily.

Lucretia Heneshaw reappeared from Jane's room, looking detached and contemptuous, as she so well knew how to do. It occurred to me that this waspish, heat-wrung woman hated us all.

Jane followed her, and I was stirred immeasurably as I saw how tremulous she had become, during those moments in the dark.

"Sit down," said Walker.

Jane obeyed, and folded her hands tight in her lap.

Almost I dropped to my knees beside her to put my arms around her, so white and scared she looked, with her eyes turned so dark a blue that they looked nearly black. Her dark wavy bobbed hair was in beloved disorder, and I wanted to smooth it with my fingers, and tell her everything was all right. But it was Buck Loftus, that great swaggering lion of a man, who lounged over to her chair and leaned on the back of it, looking almighty competent and protective, and staring back at us all with a patronizing mockery in his eyes.

"Who was it, Janey?" asked Walker, slipping back into that familiarity that I loathed. "Did you get him?"

She nodded faintly, almost imperceptibly. Doc Harmon fidgeted, and Lucretia, who sat down rigidly on the edge of a chair, was watching her with the lean intensity of a she-cat on the stalk.

"Who?" demanded Walker, his eyes bearing hard against her face.

She seemed unable to speak; but her tormented eyes turned, as if drawn irresistibly, and all our eyes followed hers. The look in her eyes was indictment, as surely as if she had spoken a name.

"Phil Heneshaw, huh?" said Walker.

No oral confirmation was needed, nor did she offer it.

Phil Heneshaw had sat down, and was now slumped in one of those frowsy wicker chairs, his hands shakily gripping the arms. That evening he had looked what he was—a man in his fifties, worn somewhat beyond his age. Now a stranger would have said that he might be ninety, or a hundred, so haggard, so gray and withered, was his face. His eyes were dark sick pools; they looked at no one, yet perpetually shifted their gaze, here and there about the musty grass matting of the floor.

In the weight of the silence I found one glance at that crumpled figure enough. Once more my eyes were running instinctively over the thousand details of that ill-starred house under the jungle.

Walker stirred; he was about to speak.

"Wait!" I snapped. The metallic click of my own voice surprised me. "*Who took that dart off the table?*"

"Who took what?" fumbled Doc Harmon dimly.

"The blowgun dart—the weapon that killed Harry Blackburn. It's been taken from the table," I said. "I know that it was there when Walker blew out the light."

"If this is some more," Doc Harmon gibbered—"some more of your infernal imaginings——"

"No," said Walker in his slow flat voice, "he's right. It was there. I know."

Nothing yet had brought home to us so forcibly that something was definitely, unbelievably wrong within the house in which we stood. Then I heard Jane's breath catch in her throat, and for the moment I forgot the black tension that had come upon us, forgot Blackburn and the jungle.

Now I want you to understand that Jane Corliss was no weakling, but a courageous and clear-witted girl of that splendid athletic type which has so changed the whole course of American thought and manners. But there is a limit to all endurance, and I think Jane Corliss could have been something less than a woman if she had not found the horror of that night more than enough for her.

I dropped to one knee beside her and took both her hands. Suddenly she hid her face in the crook of my elbow, where it rested on the arm of her chair; and her tears burned my arm as she tried to steady the spasmodic trembling that shook all of her slender frame.

CHAPTER IV

JANE pulled herself together with the brilliant, vital resilience that was always so surprising to me; though perhaps it was to be expected in the daughter of Dan Corliss, who at fifty-five could outmarch any man I knew, and had in him a driving, questing spirit of perpetual youth. When she had dried her eyes I turned my attention to the others again.

If the situation had been strained before, it was ten times more so now. Before the little feathered dart had disappeared from the table it had still been possible to believe that Harry Blackburn had been killed by the blowgun of a Choco canoe boy, in revenge for some unknown affront. Now, however, we possessed a sequence of facts of such sinister suggestion as to strike horror through us all.

A little after one o'clock one of us had tiptoed out of the house, returning after a few minutes. Shortly thereafter Jane Corliss had heard a strangling sound begin in the clearing; and though she had not then recognized it as the death rattle of a human throat,

no doubt remained that that was exactly what she had heard.

A little after two o'clock the strangling sound had abruptly ceased; and immediately thereafter I had myself seen a crouching figure enter the house—or reënter it—through the window of my room. At about two-fifteen Harry Blackburn had been discovered dead near his hammock at the edge of the clearing, with a blowgun dart under his ear. The head of an Indian doll—a meaningless bit of wood—was mysteriously missing. And finally, that blowgun dart had disappeared—stolen by one of us, evidently, from under the noses of the rest.

We knew now, too, that it was Philip Heneshaw who had left the house at one o'clock; and his own tacit denial of this action increased the incriminating significance of this fact.

At first it seemed to me that our man hunt was over before it had begun. Incredible though it appeared, my first thought was that Phil Heneshaw, the fusty, discouraged little master of the mahogany station, stood convicted of murder.

Second thought, however, raised certain objections to this, and I began to doubt. I remained silent, and waited for what time would bring forth.

The disappearance of the dart had diverted attention from Heneshaw for a few moments; but it swiftly returned.

"One thing at a time," said Walker. His sombre heavy eyes, moving from one to another of us, remained expressionless, as expressionless as his pad-like expanse of cheek, or his pouchy, arrogant lips, from which the cigar butt bobbed as he talked. "One thing at a time. You don't want to forget, you, we just found out who it was sneaked out of this house to-night. All right, Heneshaw—tune in!"

Old Phil Heneshaw, looking at least twice his fifty-odd years, licked dry lips, and his hands shifted jerkily on the arms of the chair in which he slumped. "It's true," he said in a voice like rustling paper. He glanced up once at Walker, into whose unpleasant face had come a faintly gloating look; then immediately dropped his eyes again. "I often don't sleep well, and take a walk, to get a breath of air during the night. Lucretia will tell you that."

Walker glanced at Lucretia, who, however, chose to tell nothing whatever.

"But to-night," Heneshaw went on, "there were too many mosquitoes. I never left the gallery at all, but only stood for a little while, looking out through

the screen. If only Jane had not turned her face to the wall! She would have been able to tell you that."

"Then why didn't you speak up and say so! What's the idea letting us go to all this work, putting on a show to find that out?"

"I thought—" here Heneshaw's voice quavered—"I thought that to involve myself would only confuse the issue."

"Oh, you thought it would confuse the issue, did you? Yeah, you confused it, all right!"

Glancing at Lucretia, I was surprised to find her face hard as marble. Her slightly slanted eyes were narrow, expressionless, like a cat's.

"We're getting some place," said Walker, his voice colorless and low. "Heneshaw sneaks out at one o'clock in the morning—a fact you all saw him hold out on us. After a few minutes he sneaks back. Just then the death rattle comes into Harry Blackburn's throat. Is it open and shut, you, or do I have to dig up a motive?"

"I never would have believed——" Doc Harmon began, his voice unnatural.

"God help me!" Heneshaw burst out. "I'm being crucified by stupidity!"

"Exactly what," said Walker, "do you mean by that?"

Heneshaw folded his hands in his lap, and his body relaxed, as if there had come into him a supreme resignation. He said slowly, "Some of you have known me for a long time. And if there's no one here who can say, with full conviction, beyond any shadow of doubt, that it would have been utterly impossible for me to do this thing—well, what's the use? Gentlemen, there is nothing I can say."

Harmon, the fat driller, fidgeted. His bleary face looked even rockier than when he had first been routed out of bed. "Well," he offered uneasily, "I always thought Phil was a pretty decent sort of——"

"Blah, blah, blah," Walker mocked him.

"It's true!" Jane cried. "I'd as soon suspect myself as Mr. Heneshaw!"

"Maybe that," said Walker softly, "is why you didn't tell us you knew it was him you saw, all the time?"

"What do you mean?"

Walker went to Heneshaw's cot, and let himself down on it gently. Once again the springs squawked and snapped, after their habit.

"You can hear this thing a mile," said Walker,

"and not only that, but it's the only noisy one in the house. If you heard him sneak back, you heard him hit this bed, and you can't tell me different."

"I *did* hear it," Jane retorted hotly. "But I knew that Mr. Heneshaw couldn't be guilty—so I supposed he just happened to turn over or something, while someone else was coming in."

Heneshaw spoke wearily. "If I tried to be quiet, it was to avoid disturbing my guests. But it's a wonder that outrageous spring did not wake you all. I try to keep everything oiled against the damp; but we are crowded here, gentlemen, and this cot, having just come from the storeroom——"

His mind seemed to be wandering, as if the past hour had levied too great a tax. Flatfoot Walker let a faint grin replace the visible satisfaction with which he had prodded at Heneshaw; and he now sat down, sprawled his legs out lazily, and locked his hands behind his head.

"All right, you birds. We won't fan the old guy any more. I got to admit, I was real disappointed when Miss Corliss picked him."

"You mean——" wavered Heneshaw.

"We haven't got much on you, Professor, and

that's a fact. You've slipped through our fingers—for now."

"He's done better than that," I said. "He's completely freed himself of suspicion."

"And how do you figure that out?"

"He went blundering out onto the gallery, letting himself be heard and seen. Do you think he would have done that if he'd had the least suspicion of tonight's crime? Do you think, for that matter, that he would have left Blackburn making audible noises —his job half done?"

"Somebody," said Walker, "left a job half done—and then went back."

"Compare Heneshaw's movements with those of the murderer, who came in through my room," I insisted. "The man who reëntered the house at two o'clock was even able to walk soundlessly on these squeaking floors. Moreover—and this is conclusive: there was no sound of any squeaking, popping bed after the black figure moved through my room. And Loftus will tell you that Heneshaw was immediately seen getting *out* of his bed."

"In short," yawned Walker, "we know darned well he was in bed all the time. You can't get out of a

bed without first being in it, that's a cinch. Yeah, I figured that out myself, half an hour ago."

"Then why in heaven's name have you been hammering this old man?"

"To see him squirm," said Walker complacently. "I didn't think he knew anything—and he don't."

"You are satisfied," said Heneshaw distinctly, leaning forward, "that the murderer was with Harry at the time of his death? That is, when Miss Corliss heard those strangling noises cease?"

"Yeah, Professor, he was there all right. I know that much."

"You have only my word for it," I said bluntly. "I was the only one who saw——"

"No," said Walker, "I'm not billiarding on *your* word, either, Macgregor." From his position on his shoulder blades he regarded me insolently.

"It seems to me it's time," I said, "we heard some of these things that you seem to know."

"Not just yet; there's plenty other stuff to go into," he said with relish. "There's the disappearing weapon, for instance. You were all hopped up about that, a minute ago." Heneshaw cleared his throat, and Walker turned on him leisurely. I had not known until to-night that Walker so greatly disliked Phil

Heneshaw. "You seem to be feeling a little safer, Professor."

"I was just going to say," said Heneshaw, "that perhaps when we know who—who removed that dart, we will know who has done this terrible thing."

"Oh—you guess it was an inside job after all, do you?"

"It seems—it seems——" Heneshaw wavered. "Gentlemen, this is horrible! I don't know what to think."

"Glad you mentioned it," said Walker heartily. "He says"—he turned to us weightily—"that he don't know what to think."

"Let him alone," growled Buck Loftus. "He's right, at that. We've got to find that poison thumb tack, next thing we do."

"And a big chance you got," Walker retorted. "It was maybe three inches long, and slim. It could be shoved behind one of these warped boards, or hid in one of them cigars in that box. You'd have to tear the house down."

"We can try, can't we?" boomed Buck belligerently.

"Go ahead," Walker invited him.

Nobody moved to carry out this suggestion.

"And now," I rammed in again, "my friend Flatfoot, I'd like to hear what you were doing, about two o'clock."

"Lying awake in bed," he said promptly.

"Oh, something woke you, did it?"

"How about it, Doc?" asked Walker with a malicious grin at Harmon. "What woke me?"

"Well," said the fat driller nervously, "the fact is, I wasn't sleeping any too well myself, and I got up and went to the window for a breath of air, and stood looking out the window, and lighting a cigarette——"

"Say," demanded Buck Loftus, "wasn't *any*one asleep in this house to-night?"

"It isn't so much the heat," complained Harmon querulously, "as the——"

"Oh, get on with your lie," Walker prodded him. "You were crashing about the room, and lit a lot of matches—then what?"

"Well, damn it, I was looking out the window. Someone was prowling around out back, and I knew it was one of those sneak-thief Choco servants; and I was watching to see if he would make a try at the cooler box. There was a couple of chops left over from dinner, and I thought——"

"And what with stamping about and wheezing,

and banging the screen up and down, you woke me up," finished Walker. "Only—how did you know it was a Chocoman you saw, way out there in the dark? Saw his face in the moonlight, I suppose, and can tell us which——"

"Well, no—— Say, damn it, I *don't* know it was a Chocoman. By gosh, I hadn't thought of——"

"And he went back into the huts?"

"No, I think he saw the light of my match; because he stopped, and kind of eased back, and I lost him round the corner of the house."

"Round the corner to Blackburn's side of the house?"

"Say, come to think of it, it was. That was how I happened to open the screen—I leaned out to see if I could keep him in sight. And I guess it was the screen shutting woke you up, huh?"

"Blackburn's side of the house is the side where Joe and I slept," said Buck Loftus. "Joe's already told you somebody came in through our room."

Loftus seemed to be edging onto my side of the fence—probably out of dislike for Flatfoot Walker. Walker, however, made helpless waving motions with his hands, and when he spoke it was through a spasm of chuckles.

"Very nice—if Doc wasn't lying."

"Say, damn it——" began Harmon irritably.

"You saw him at the window, didn't you?" Loftus thundered at Walker.

"Yeah, and what about it? How do I know where he was before that? Maybe he was out on the gallery, seeing about them chops personal. Maybe," he added more grimly, "he was out other places."

"If you don't believe anybody, what are you asking questions for?" Loftus demanded.

"You want me to believe," said Walker, "that fat old Doc Harmon saw somebody prowling around the clearing at the time of the murder—at the exact time of the murder—and never thought a thing about it, or that it was worth mentioning, until just this minute?"

"The fact is——" began Doc steamily.

"It says in the book," said Walker, "that when a guy begins by saying, 'The fact is,' why it ain't a fact but a lie."

"All right," Harmon exploded, "I'll tell you the truth!" His face was purple, his jowls quivered, and his watery faded eyes popped angrily. "I was going to mention it first off; then when you began to pull this inside-job stuff I figured I wouldn't say anything

about being up just then. How the hell was I to know you saw me up?"

"And you thought," supplied Walker, "that dragging yourself into it would just confuse the issue, as the professor says."

"Put it that way if you want to, damn it!"

"Well, now," said Walker lazily, "the fat boy begins to sound like he's telling the truth, once. All this holding out on us was just an afterthought on Doc's part, fellows—he didn't mean no harm. If he'd meant business at the time, or had any notion what was going on, he wouldn't have stamped around there lighting matches and advertising himself, would he? See now? Trust Papa. I'm not trying to frame nobody."

"This business seems to amuse you, Mr. Walker," said Phil Heneshaw acidly.

"Yeah, I'm having a fairly whoopee night,"agreed Walker. "What with you guys all being so bighearted about keeping the issue so unconfused. But I'll learn you. Well, this brings us somewheres else. Now we'll smoke out some of these sneak-thief bushmen that Doc was mentioning."

"The servants are peace-abiding Christian Chocomen," mumbled Heneshaw.

"All right, Buck my lad," suggested Walker, "suppose you take a shotgun, or whatever you think you'll need, and go round up a few peace-abiding Christians. Bring 'em right in. I want to see which ones are missing, if some."

Buckner Loftus hardly troubled to answer him. "Get 'em yourself, if you want 'em," he recommended.

Flatfoot Charley Walker stopped chewing his cigar to try Buck with one of those heavy slow stares; but a halfway, one-sided grin was all the effort netted him, and after a minute or two he seemed to change his mind. He got up leisurely.

"Fair enough," he agreed unexpectedly. "Anyone want to come? Think I may have the dart on me, and might hide it while I'm out? No? All right, get me right onto the pan, fellows, because I'll be back in a minute."

He sauntered out by way of the rear gallery.

The setting of the moon had turned what was left of the night very black; and when Flatfoot Charley had disappeared into the darkness a silence fell upon us. Walker had taken advantage of a ticklish situation to amuse himself, deliberately affronting each of us in turn, and this had not endeared him to us.

But we did not yet know what manner of madness was in that house, or, perhaps, outside in the night; we knew only what was now in the bed in which Buck had slept. In that uncertainty I think we were all of us reluctant to see one of our number walk into the shrouding jungle dark, which, for all we knew, might not yield him up to us again.

All of us, that is, but one, whom we could not at that time name.

CHAPTER V

We did not pan Walker, as he had suggested, when he was gone. After a moment or two there was a general stir of restlessness, and when Jane offered to make coffee I was glad to accompany her.

There was no kitchen. Instead there were cupboards, a cooler, and a wood stove on the screened rear gallery. These arrangements were partly shut off from the rest of the gallery by a chin-high partition, the other side of the gallery serving as a dining room. No one followed us as I picked up one of the lamps and lighted Jane's way. I learned later why it was they chose to remain where they were.

The lamplight on the screen wire cut off all view of what was outside, and beyond in the dark; but I knew that thirty or forty yards away, to the rear, were the decaying grass huts toward which Walker had gone. I peered out, trying to glimpse his light among the huts, but could not.

When I had got a fire going in the little stove I leaned close to Jane, speaking in whispers.

"One thing's certain," I told her. "At the first daylight, you and I are going to hop off."

She tossed me a little fearful glance. "What do you mean?"

"I mean to get you out of here. I'm shy of gas, but I can get to Laguna, and refuel there. We'll be in Panama, or Cartagena, whichever you choose, by this afternoon. I recommend Panama; you'll be more comfortable there than in Cartagena, until your father gets back. As for money, I can cable for it."

Slowly she shook her head. "I—I can't go."

"In heaven's name, why not?"

She was silent for so long that I thought she was not going to answer me; but at last she said, "I can't tell you why."

You can imagine, this rocked me back on my heels. "But do you realize——"

"Realize what?"

I hesitated. After all, what exactly was there to realize? We still knew so little about what was happening here.

"That there has been a murder to-night," was all I could supply.

"Will you be leaving to-morrow?" she asked mechanically.

"Without you? You know better than that!"

Jane turned to the coffee pot.

"What is it you're not telling me?" I asked again.

She gave me a tormented glance.

"Don't you know that I——" I began.

"If the time comes," she whispered, "when it will do any good, I'll tell you what it is. But not now, Joe. Please don't ask me again."

I shifted ground, concealing my bitterness.

"What do you make of Walker?"

"Well—I was glad to see him stop harassing poor old Heneshaw. Anybody could see that Mr. Heneshaw couldn't possibly—do anything like that!"

"That's just the trouble," I answered. "He *could* have done it."

"You think——"

"I think there is nobody here to-night whose real character we know. Of course, you've lived with the Heneshaws nearly a month. But—well, what kind of a man *is* Heneshaw?"

"Quiet—very quiet; just a disheartened old——"

"Does anyone ever know a quiet man? For that matter, these free-running talkers, like Walker and Harmon, are just as bad. Their run of words acts as a smoke screen, and hides the truth. On top of that,

there's the effect the tropics have on a man. I tell you, this is a mad country, Jane, for North-bred men. I've been here three years, and I've seen enough of it to know that half the men down here are not their normal selves in this heat."

Again I saw the startled spark show for a moment in Jane's eyes. Suddenly I wondered exactly where Dan Corliss was. None of us definitely knew. Instantly I thrust the thought out of my head.

"There's no one here that we can believe," I went on. "None of them in there, for that matter, is ready to believe me."

"Joe, are you *certain* of what you saw?" Jane asked slowly.

"Someone coming through my room, you mean?"

She nodded.

"Perfectly—there's absolutely no question about it. What I saw would, under normal conditions, have been impossible. But to-night is *not* normal, in any way?"

"Very far from it."

She carried cups and saucers into the house, and I followed her with the coffee pot and lamp. All during the simmering of the coffee there had been a dim flutter and cross-fire of talk going on in there. As I

appeared, this ceased, and its place was taken by a silence which the small clatter of the china could not conceal. I set down the equipment.

"Well, come out with it!" I suggested.

Harmon, Loftus, and Heneshaw exchanged glances. Only Lucretia met my eye with an ironic gleam.

"Where," said Heneshaw at last, "are Harry Blackburn's notes? His field book, I mean?"

"In my back pocket, right now," I answered.

"That was Harmon's impression," said Heneshaw; and Doc puffed his cigarette nervously.

"Impression hell," I snapped. "You all knew he gave me his field book, to take to Laguna by plane so O'Hare could start the plot-out. You can look at it if you want to." I tossed it onto the table.

"Much good to look at it," said Harmon. "That boy was smart. He carried his base lines in his head. Maybe he reversed his compass card too, for all I know. But the upshot is, his notes are jargon. I know, because he tried them out on me, to see if I could read them. And I'll say the man don't live that can plot them out."

Heneshaw picked up the field book—just a notebook bound in stiff, worn leather—and leafed it through incuriously. Its pages, I suppose, contained

a score of maps, geologic and topographic; but those maps were in the form of cryptic notations only—"N20′—552 (paces)," and so on—long compact columns of compass points and distances. It was true that you could not convert those notes without the correct azimuths.

"There's a chap back in the office that can plot Blackburn's notes," said Heneshaw. "O'Hare, isn't it?"

"Naturally," I said. "Why should he want me to fly his notes back ahead of him, unless there was somebody at Laguna who could plot them?"

At this point Walker came stumping in across the rear gallery; but, curiously, for the moment no one regarded him.

"I can't see what this has to do with our problem," said Heneshaw. "These notes could not possibly constitute a motive—at least not for murder—because they're undecipherable, and we all know it."

"Unless," said Walker's flat voice, "someone wished to intercept those notes before they were plotted out in Laguna. Lose them, huh? Or jim them up. No point to that with Blackburn alive. See it?"

"No," I said. "If someone wanted to squelch the dope Harry was bringing out of the jungle he would

have to eliminate both Harry and the book. And the book is still safe, and is doggone likely to remain so, I'll tell the cockeyed river!"

What he was getting at was plain enough. I waited for it, and it came.

"Blackburn is dead; and his notes are safe—in *whose* hands?"

I looked from one to another of them, and none of them met my eye, not even Walker, now. I waited.

"Folks," Walker went on, "you see, we now have something worth looking at: an honest-to-God motive. We don't know what discovery Blackburn made, nor why anyone wants to head it off. We only know one thing: Joe Macgregor is the boy who has come up with the field book in his teeth."

"And no one has tried to get it from him," Harmon summed up.

"And no one had better," I added, "if that's what you're getting around to!"

"It doesn't happen to be," Walker said, studying his cigar. The rubber buyer did not seem to be baiting me as he had the others, though whether this was complimentary, or ominous, I could not tell. "Macgregor, what did you do after you saw this—this spook go through your room?"

"I got up—as you perfectly well know," said I.

"What then?" Walker's eye ran around the circle of faces, but avoided mine.

"Buck came back from the water cooler."

"Yeah," said Walker slowly. "I heard that, too. Here's two more members for your owl club, Professor. So many, many people taking little walks in the dark!"

"Well, and what of it?" demanded Buck belligerently.

"And you," Walker turned on him, "you're another that's afraid of getting the issue confused, huh? So it was you I heard tramping around here—to the water cooler, of course. At about two o'clock," he added. "Such coincidences!"

"What you're losing sight of is this," I objected: "this is an extremely hot night, even for the equator. I see nothing surprising if everyone here made a shift of some sort at an average of once an hour during the night. What surprises me is that anyone slept at all."

"If anyone did, but me," said Walker. "By the way, Buck, you didn't see this here sinister figure rush in here from your room about then, did you?"

"Well—a board let out a squawk in here," Buck grouched.

"Yeah. Well, that accounts for everybody but you, Mrs. Heneshaw."

"I was asleep," Lucretia snapped at him. "I've been in the tropics long enough not to be bothered by a little heat."

"That's rocking 'em, Sister."

"Mr. Walker," said Phil Heneshaw, with more menace in his voice than I would have thought he could achieve, "I advise you not to go too far."

"Somebody around here has already gone too far, seems to me," said the rubber buyer's slow, flat voice.

"One other isn't accounted for," growled Buckner Loftus. "Who knows where you were, Flatfoot?"

"Nobody," said Walker bluntly. "You haven't got the least thing to tell you where I was. You don't know if I heard what I said I heard, or seen what I said I seen. One after the other of you, I've pried admissions out of you all, and made you like it, yeah? Yeah!"

That was a thick-skinned man. He now chuckled explosively within himself, and picked up the coffee I had poured him, apparently unaware of the hostile

stares that were centering upon him. I was the only one who grinned, tickled by the man's rash impudence.

"Who made this coffee?" he demanded, shaking the pot. When Jane said, "I did," he set his cup aside untouched, and poured himself a fresh saucerful from the pot. Then he sprawled in his chair again, sipping his coffee noisily, and ogling us all across the brim of the saucer with more self-satisfaction than I had ever seen in one man before.

With Walker silent a curiously static pause fell upon the group. He had at least furnished a certain driving investigative force. And though no one had appreciated his officiousness, no one seemed eager to take the lead in his place. After a minute or two of general silence I turned away.

"Walker wins round one," I remarked; and went into my room to get shirt and shoes. I had not before wanted to take time for that, and was still wearing only the canvas trousers I had put on when I first got up. Loftus followed my example, and we rummaged in the dark for our clothes.

"We've got to squash this bird," Loftus grumbled in my ear.

"Why?"

"He's trying to hang this on you, you chump," Buck growled. "And me too, for that matter."

"Let him."

When we returned to the main room I tried a new tack.

"You were gone some little time, Flatfoot, rounding up your peace-abiding sneak thieves," I reminded him. "Where are they?"

"I don't know where they are," Walker answered.

"Master Mind turns in a blank," grunted Loftus.

"I'm pretty near ready to believe your ghost story, Macgregor," said Walker. "Every last one of those smokes has taken a powder."

"A what?" demanded Heneshaw.

"A run-out powder, Professor," explained Walker. "Your peace-abiding Christians have all lammed, to the last abider."

It took a few moments for this to soak in. Loftus, still jabbing away at Walker, was first to comment.

"So right away you figure out that checks up with Joe's story about somebody going through our room. Oh, my lord! I suppose you have it now that what he saw was the house boy and family, fleeing for their native jungle by the shortest route—in one window and out a couple of others!"

"That may be your theory," Walker retorted. "But all I say is, one of those smokes must of saw something, and they all sloped for the tall while the sloping was fresh."

"Can it be," said Heneshaw, "that I was wrong about those servants? Why, I would have trusted any one of them with——"

"With his own hide. This was no bunch of iron-nerved redskin scouts, Professor. Many a one of these jungle boys has seen trouble start, and been twenty miles into the cover when it ended."

"But what can we conclude?" went on Heneshaw, disregarding him. "Harry Blackburn is shot with a poisoned dart from a blowgun; and coincidentally the Choco servants and their families fade into the bush. We can only assume——"

"Assume that before they faded out they yanked this dart right out from under our noses by means of magical magnetisms known only to Choco voodoo doctors. Oh, gosh, Professor!"

"We're getting no place," objected Heneshaw irritably.

"We're getting on toward morning, at any rate," Doc Harmon wheezed. "Boys, I was never so glad to see daylight come on in my life!"

You could hardly say when the dawn began, so slowly did the first dim grayness seep into that black jungle clearing by the river; but the feel of dawn was in the air, and from the edge of the jungle sounded a clear metallic piping, the odd, harshly sweet call of a bird whose name I never heard.

CHAPTER VI

"The dawn of a new day, bringing better things," said Walker—"and other hooey."

"Damn it," said Harmon, "if it brings breakfast, that will anyway be something."

Walker was obdurate in his insistence that no one was to do any cooking but Jane; and because Jane was willing and everyone else either indifferent or lazy, no one made any very stubborn objection. As for me, I was glad to have her busy at something that would take her mind off the situation; and I was not at all certain that the suspicion behind Walker's whim did not have reason in it.

Harmon, Walker, and Buckner Loftus ate in the hearty manner of the traditional condemned. No one else seemed much interested. But tropic dawns are brief, and the direct sunlight was striking across the top of the jungle by the time we had finished that very taciturn breakfast.

"It's about light enough," Harmon suggested morbidly, wiping his mouth, "to begin digging. Not practical to ship poor Harry back home, of

course." His fat face looked mawkishly mournful, so that I looked for him to say a few selected words on the subject of home. Instead he suggested, "We'll have to make a thorough examination, I suppose."

"That seems necessary, in the natural order of things," said Heneshaw.

"Yeah, hop to it," said Walker. "Just call and ask me, if there's anything you don't get."

During the awkward lull while we waited for the full light of morning, I walked down to see if the Estrago had risen or fallen under the floats of my plane. I had given the ship as flexible a mooring as I could, but those jungle rivers can go up or down half a dozen feet in a night, and the last thing I wanted was to let my crate bog her floats in the mud.

It was a relief to find the rickety old Jenny sitting intact and afloat, riding in that awkward way of hers on her jury-rigged pontoons. She was old and cranky, and more than a little treacherous, but she had all the value to me of a magic carpet, for her cockpits were the gates of Panama, or Cartagena. I had not wavered in my determination to get Jane away from the jungle that day.

I pushed out to the plane in a dugout that rested near by, and climbed her, my hand automatically

reaching for the oil can. That was habit, for in those days I practically lived in a crouching position over that OX-5 engine.

Right there I received the nastiest shock I had sustained so far.

The spark coil was gone from the OX-5.

A good smash in the jaw would have been an agreeable surprise in comparison to that discovery. I had not realized how much I had come to depend upon the mobility given me by that rickety old ship, nor how much I had staked on my plan to get Jane Corliss away from the scene of mystery and tragedy at once. I could not at first comprehend the import of what had happened, but just sat straddling the cowling, making false motions with the can of oil.

Then there came over me a terrible sense of helplessness, the caught feeling a bird must experience with clipped wings; and with it a burst of black anger, so that I hurled the oil can into the cockpit, and went slithering and cursing down into the dugout canoe.

My first move was to pole the dugout to the decrepit launch belonging to the Far Rivers Mahogany outfit, to see if I could use the coil from the engine of the launch. A brief examination told me definitely that I could not. The launch coil was a corroded and

crippled affair, unlikely to feed a spark good enough for the limping engine of the boat, let alone the hot jolt necessary to get my Jenny off the water.

For a few moments I sat trying to imagine where I ought to look for the stolen coil, but that was a hopeless business too; the coil might be in the bottom of the Estrago, with the alligators, for all I knew. I poled ashore, and walked fuming back to the house.

Jane Corliss was puttering about in the makeshift kitchen, and I went directly to her. In whispers I told her what had happened.

"Go straight down to the launch," I told her. "I'm going to get my automatic, and meet you there. I'll get that launch to Laguna if I have to run the propeller on the crank. She isn't fit to run the open water in the Gulf of Tortugon, but a smash on the Carib beach is better for you than to stay here."

She shook her head. "I told you I couldn't go, Joe."

"You must. From Laguna I can put you on the coast boat to Cartagena. Then I mean to come back here. But first, I'm going to have you out of here. This is intolerable!"

She raised her head and looked me squarely in the

eyes; and her own blue eyes were clear and steady in the increasing morning light. With a new sensation of futility I perceived that I could not yet bend the will of this girl.

"Then," I told her, "I'll have to take you by force, that's all!"

She smiled, ever so faintly. "And what will the others be doing? Perhaps you didn't know this: but they were watching you, all of them, every moment that you were out looking at your plane. If I hadn't known you didn't mean to hop I would have warned you; because I know that they would never have let your ship rise. They would have fired on you first, Joe, I truly believe!"

"But what I'm telling you——"

"You couldn't take me away from here," she said without resentment, "even if I were willing to go. It's an ugly thing to say, Joe, but it's true: they trust you least of all. The field book- —"

"If they want fight——" I began furiously.

"What earthly good would it do? They're too many for you. If you and Buck stood together it would be different—but it's quite plain you don't. For you to start trouble would only mean one less person whom I can count on here."

By the golden light of morning the charm of Jane Corliss was less haunting and elusive, but more vivid and real, so that she was more than ever desirable and precious to me. An impotent fury shook me as I realized that for the present I was powerless to remove her from the shadow of the mystery that had walked the night. I put this down, however.

"You do count on me then?"

"You are the only one I've told that I have a reason for staying here," she said. "Except Buck."

There was a bitter twist in the last two words, but I shrugged. "'Except Buck,'" I repeated. "I suppose he has the whole story."

She shot me a sharp reproachful glance, but shook her head. I was cooler, now, and I knew that what she had said was true. Any attempt to get her away from there by force would end in disaster, simple and direct.

I thought of appealing to Buckner Loftus to help me. But that man wore an armor of his own, composed of a supreme belief in the ability and astuteness of Buckner Loftus, and I knew that I would be the last one able to persuade him from any chosen course. He had, I thought—later I was able to confirm this—an idea that Jane was one person perfectly safe at

this place; and he would be quick to take Jane's side against me.

I drew a deep breath and a new cool energy came into me as I saw that the issue was clearly drawn at last. So far I had been content to stand back, biding my time cautiously, and letting the weight of inquiry rest upon whoever cared to assume it. A certain counter-punching instinct had made me think I could learn most by letting the others play their cards. And from the first I had been interested in no other thing than in getting Jane five hundred miles away from that ominous tangle.

Now that was changed. The jungle clearing was a trap, the lid of which was definitely closed. It remained to me only to come to grips with whatever horror was about us—among us—in that house beside the black river. Strangely, I felt better, and more certain of myself, now that this was clear.

Within the house the four men—Heneshaw, Walker, Loftus, and Harmon—were gathered in an incohesive group before the door of the room I had shared with Buck.

I caught Walker's eye, and motioned him aside. "I want to talk to you."

"Sure. Now?"

"In just a minute."

We waited long enough to notice who was holding back, and who taking the lead, in the examination of the body. Curiously, it was Buck Loftus who stood aloof, apparently fascinated, but making no move to draw near; and Heneshaw who went about the examination with cool, efficient hands. Harmon assisted him gingerly. That was all I wanted to know.

Walker and I went outside.

"Not interested in the inquest, huh?" said Walker casually.

He seemed nervous, now that he was with me alone. Unlike the others, he seemed to have gained no added assurance from the sunlight. Instead, the morning light appeared to have sapped from him the excess of confident energy with which he had annoyed us during the night. His expressionless flat pads of cheeks seemed less tanned, more sallow, by the light of morning. And the whole man seemed shrunk in importance, so that he looked smaller, and not nearly so dominant as his glaring striped shirt.

"Well," he offered, "I guess they won't learn so much, at that."

"No," I agreed, "I guess they won't." His black

opaque eyes shifted about wearily under my gaze, and I could not fix them, as I wished. He tossed one brief glance at me, and that was all.

"You were out a long time, among those servants' huts," I went on.

"Yeah. It took time." His voice sounded small and far away, with nothing in it to recall the confident blare he had used all night. It was as if he were a night animal, who gained strength in darkness. You find men like that, sometimes, and they are not usually particularly wholesome to know.

"I want that dart," I told him.

Walker showed no surprise. He mouthed his cigar, his eyes moving heavily about the clearing. Then he turned his slow stare on me, for a moment or two, opaque as ever. I waited, tense, uncertain of what to expect. What I got was least expected of all.

"I'll show it to you," he said in his flat voice. "But first I want you to understand something. You haven't got no lines on me, see? I'm only letting you in this for one reason: because you ain't the one."

"Oh, you know that, too, do you? Why?"

"Because," said Walker, "you're the only one thinks I did it."

"And how do you know that?"

"Lots of reasons. You got me out here—that's one thing, huh? If you'd done it you wouldn't be striking at the bottom of this business, like you're doing; you'd be stalling like the rest, and maybe trying to make me look bad in front of the others. Yeah, I can read you, Son."

Some of that irritating insolence of his was coming back, but only a shadow of what he had shown before.

"Looks as if I read you, this time," I commented.

"No—you're guessing, Son. But you guessed good. You're a better guesser than I like to see against me. Better or luckier. You and me got to work together on this, it looks like."

I was unable to sense any sincerity in this. "Maybe we will, and maybe we won't," I told him harshly. "Now we'll have the dart you took off the table."

He unbuttoned the cuff of that baggy striped shirt, rolled up the sleeve deliberately, and exposed his forearm to my gaze.

"There it is."

The dart was fixed to his forearm by a rubber band, which also held the downy tuft of feathers flat. But what was utterly incredible to me, what ripped from me an oath of amazement, was this: the point of

that lethal little weapon was thrust into the flesh of the man's arm, and lay visible under the thick white skin to the depth of a good half inch.

This—I could only think—*this man is insane!*

A new sense of intolerable uncertainty overwhelmed me. That the dart was the one whose poison had killed Harry Blackburn, I was certain at sight. Yet this incredible idiot . . .

"Man, are you mad?"

"Cut out the yelling," he cautioned me.

"Don't you realize that the poison on that dart—— Say, what is this? Suicide?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm thorough, Son, that's all. Any boob can see that it wasn't no dart killed this Blackburn. I seen right away that Blackburn must of been a pretty sick little guy before that dart landed him. If he'd got this dart when Janey—Miss Corliss —first heard them peculiar noises, the blood where the dart went in would have been drier. That's one thing. And then I found out that something else had been used to actually kill this guy."

"But, you fool," I protested, "I've seen these Choco natives use the same dart to kill ten birds in succession, without once refreshing the poison. Of

course the hunting poison is different; but if this dart had been poisoned you wouldn't have lasted until——"

"I could have pulled it out, couldn't I, if it had started to work?" he said sulkily. "Anyway, I figured even if it was poisoned, there wouldn't be much poison left."

"There would certainly have been some."

"You can testify to that?"

"Certainly I can."

"That's the stuff. Now look at this here."

He now rolled up his other sleeve, and showed me where he had stuck a whittled match stick under the skin, in a position roughly corresponding to that of the dart. My skin crawled as I remembered how casually he had sharpened that stick the night before, pushing his slow questions at us while he worked. I was a long way from knowing Charley Walker.

"Yeah, I'm thorough, Son. Papa don't miss many tricks. Now, you look close. There's some soreness and swelling, see? Bound to be. Though there naturally isn't any poison on no match. Now I want you to be able to testify both them wounds in my arms is the same—see?"

I was forced to agree.

"Then you got to testify that there wasn't no poison on this here dart, huh?"

"Yes, but——"

"And you can swear this is the same dart they stuck in Harry, huh? And it wasn't poisoned, huh?"

"Yes. Unless you treated the dart before——"

He gave a gesture of impatience. "We'll fix that up. What all do you think I had time for in the dark, huh?"

"But don't you realize, the chance of infection alone——"

"Aw, blah, I ain't worried about no microbes."

For a moment I stood wondering what manner of nerve—or lunacy—a man had to have to pull a dart from the flesh of a murdered man and deliberately thrust it into his own. Theory or no theory, the thing was incredible to me, and remains so yet. These things I put out of my mind, however, for there was more I needed to know, and my time was short.

"And what was it you found killed Harry Blackburn? You said a minute ago——"

"Yeah, I'll show you."

We were standing now at the extreme edge of the clearing, and were fairly well concealed from the

house by a clump of bamboo; but Walker hesitated and surveyed the clearing slowly before he went on.

"I made a mistake," he admitted. "Yeah, I made one mistake. But I had to work fast, too fast. You gotta admit, I took the jump on the mob—you included. But this one thing was a mistake. Because I needed testimony to this, and we can't get it now."

He took a crumpled ball of paper out of his pocket, unrolled it slowly, and extended it, open in his palm, so that I could see what it contained.

There, at last, was the missing head of the Choco doll.

CHAPTER VII

Now this man Walker, called Flatfoot Charley, unquestionably possessed a singularly quick and active brain. His lunatic experiment with the dart convinced me that he was in addition both an ignoramus and a fool. That he had a hide like an alligator I had of course known before.

Behind this singular array of unattractive traits the man remained a mystery to me. I could not even place his origin, for his speech was a queer composite, as likely to revert unexpectedly to the Iowa farmlands as to the sidewalks of New York. He combined extraordinary foxy cunning with moments of blind idiocy, and a supreme egotistic courage with dark suspicious fears. On the whole, I was inclined to think that this supposed rubber buyer was not entirely rational. And this, in the light of what followed, is my opinion to-day.

"Exhibit B," said Walker, holding that inane little wooden head toward me in his palm. "This here is what we call the terminal weapon. Blackburn was

already done for. But this here is what finally piped him down, once and for all."

"You mean to tell me this thing was used as a weapon?" That little piece of carved wood, no bigger than a small lemon, was unchanged since I had last seen it in its place on the grotesque Choco doll; except that the vegetable stains with which it was colored had become somewhat smeared. As it lay in Walker's hand my eyes could verify that it was nothing but the solid, insignificant piece of corkwood I had known it to be all along.

"Yeah—it amounts to a weapon," said Walker. "This is pretty rough stuff; you're not going to like to hear this at all, Macgregor. Somebody pushed this thing into Blackburn's throat."

Here, surely, was madness. A new sombre horror seemed to make itself felt in the clearing as I slowly comprehended the insane nature of the thing that had transpired here. The stillness and the steam of the jungle were heavy with that horror, making a mockery of the brilliant sunlight.

"I should have left it there, until I got witnesses," Walker went on. "But I didn't know what it was until I took it out, and then it was too late. Well, we'll keep it. But I can see where my testimony

isn't going to be much good about where I found it."

"I can see that."

He sighed, rewrapped the little wooden head, and put it back in his pocket. "Don't believe me yourself, maybe? Well, it don't make no difference. Either we'll hang this on somebody, or we won't. I'll keep these things, though, for the present. Any time, now, the guilty party's going to begin worrying about where they've got to."

Suddenly he turned on me with an expression as near appeal as that man was capable of. "Use your head," he almost snarled at me. "Think, will you, if you've got the wheels! Last night at chow—yesterday afternoon—what did Blackburn eat that the rest of us didn't? Who slung his coffee? Who got near him while he ate?"

"I sat on one side of him at dinner," I said. "You sat on the other."

"Oh, yeah, I know that. I've combed over every move he made yesterday, and it's got me stopped. Nothing to eat, except of a piece with what the rest of us ate. Nothing to drink, but water from the cooler. But, Son"—a shadow of his former sufficiency here returned to him—"Harry Blackburn was poisoned."

Thinking rapidly, for me, I realized that there was not one thing in all that Walker had said which I could fix on as known fact; and without known facts, attempt at logic was groundless. Even that incredible experiment of his with the poisoned dart could have been faked by a quick and clever man. That Walker was attempting, deliberately, to prepare me as a witness, seemed fairly clear; but there was no way of knowing whether he was at bottom preparing for prosecution or defense.

"Poisoned," repeated Walker heavily. "He was poisoned, you hear?"

"One thing more," I said. "I want the spark coil you took off my engine."

"Oh, a spark coil, was it?" he said disinterestedly. "Thought you'd missed something when you came steaming back from the landing."

"I want that back," I repeated.

"Yes," he said, mouthing his cigar, "I expect you do."

In a sudden anger I shot out a hand to take him by the throat, but changed my mind at the last instant, and gripped his shoulder instead. He grunted as my thumb dug into muscles that I found surprisingly hard, but his face showed no emotion.

"I want that coil," I said again.

"I haven't got it," he declared. "If somebody grabbed your coil it was somebody knew something about airplanes, and I was never in one in my life: I wouldn't of known which end your fool engine was in, even."

"Anybody who can drive an automobile could have taken that coil," I insisted.

"Buck Loftus—he's the only other pilot in the mob," said Walker stubbornly. "Go ask him for your damn coil. I haven't got it, I tell you, and I haven't been near your machine either!"

I let go of him, and turned back toward the house.

"Don't you spill any of this stuff now," he warned me. "Because if you do I'll turn the works on you quicker'n a shot."

"What works?"

"You're the only one," he reminded me, with a certain gleam in his eye, "that we can hang a motive on yet. Just you keep your mouth shut, Sonny, if you know what's good for the little man."

"I asked three questions," I told him, "and got two answers. And I'll guarantee this: I'll use what I've learned at whatever time and in whatever way I see fit. That you can depend on."

"Suit yourself," said Walker indifferently.

We walked back in the direction of the house. A curious exhilaration was coming into me. Subtly I felt my mind tighten a notch as I perceived that the very instability of what I had learned from Flatfoot Walker gave me a certain perspective upon the problem which I now faced.

Heneshaw, Loftus, and Harmon had left the house, and were inspecting the ground near Blackburn's slashed mosquito net. There was little to learn there now, they had so trampled the grass. As we approached them the three were looking at the bark of one of the buttonwoods from which the hammock was swung.

This tree has a smooth tough bark, not easily scarred; but across it ran four parallel scratches, such as could have been made by the nails of a man's clutching hand.

Buck Loftus grunted. "So he was dragged, was he? And made a grab for the tree, here."

"No," said I, "Blackburn was not dragged; at least, not past this tree."

They waited for me to explain this, and they would have waited a good while; but Doc Harmon had an unexpected flash of perception. People who knew this

man accused him of sharp wits, that had to be looked out for in poker or in business. My short acquaintance with him, however, had not revealed him as much better than a fathead, and I was surprised to hear him make a timely observation.

"It's funny," Harmon said, "but there wasn't any bark under Blackburn's nails."

"That's true," I told them. "Harry Blackburn was careful of his nails. Anything irregular about them would be especially noticeable, in his case."

"And what is your theory?" Heneshaw asked.

"I haven't any." This was true. One of the first things a field geologist learns is that it is worse than futile to jump at conclusions until your survey of the outcrops is as complete as you mean to make it. What I had learned so far was curiously unsatisfactory, and much of it paradoxical.

It was particularly hard to conceive how a man's fingernails could rip across that tough bark without breaking at least one of them; and Blackburn had not had the heavy, horny type of nails that could have done so. From that moment forth I began to watch the hands of the others for an opportunity to study their fingernails; and I was watching also for a trace of grease in the creases of the fingers, such as

might suggest something about the theft of that spark coil of mine. An observation like that takes time, however, if you are not going to be officious about it.

I now became aware of a very definite sensation of being stared at from behind. If you are a practical person, who wants to attribute this to the general nervousness that was on us all, you are probably right. But when I glanced over my shoulder it was to find Lucretia Heneshaw regarding me from a distance of ten paces; and in her eyes was an inescapable appeal.

I was startled, for I had not heard her approach. The others, however, glanced at her indifferently, apparently noticing nothing unusual in her expression. The general muddle of the search now moved off along the edge of the clearing, and I accompanied the rest far enough to read what the grass had to say, before they had got it all trampled down. Here came to light one more detail that needed accounting for. A distinct trail, marked in bent or broken grass stems, ran along near the edge of the bamboo. I judged it to have been twice traversed, once in each direction, no longer ago than the night before; and it apparently proceeded from the grass huts at the

clearing's extreme rear, and ran around the margin of the clearing to the site of Blackburn's hammock.

The entire male personnel now discovered this mark in the grass, and pursued it in full cry. I went with them as far as the bare, hard-baked earth among the huts, where the trail was lost; then fell behind, and left the group unnoticed. I hated to let the five of them go blundering on without me, for I feared they would unwittingly obliterate valuable things. But chances were rare, in the dark shadow of our unanimous mutual suspicion, to speak to any individual alone, and I considered it essential now to question Lucretia.

Mrs. Heneshaw was strolling down the path to the landing, where were moored the Far Rivers launch and my plane. Back-trailing past Blackburn's hammock, in a parallel direction to the path to the river, I now discovered that the trail in the grass led past the hammock and toward the landing, and I followed it to the river. Thus I killed two birds with one shot, for I was able to assure myself immediately that the path in the grass contained no heel print, or other mark that I could discover; and at the same time my search brought me to the landing in time to intercept Lucretia.

She did not look at me at once as I joined her, but stood leaning against a decaying piling, staring at the black surface of the water. Her hands hung folded before her in a position of rest; but I saw that the knuckles were white.

"You've found out something, Mrs. Heneshaw." She turned her eyes to me. They were green eyes, the whites of which were faintly tinged by that touch of jaundice which hardly anyone in the tropics consistently escapes. But what I noticed now was that they were full of horror.

Her eyes dropped again to the river, and she shook her head.

"But you wanted to talk to me," I insisted.

"Yes—yes, I did."

"What was it?" I tried to make my voice as gentle as I could. For this woman I had a very real sympathy, little as I liked her. Her marriage to Phil Heneshaw had been an obvious blunder, and her waspish hostility to the world was plainly the expression of bitterly overstrung nerves. Nor are the tropics kind to white women.

Probably she was in her late thirties, but sun and heat, together with that harsh inner tension that had victimized her, had made her look ten or fifteen years

older than she was. And now this was pathetically emphasized by the fact that to-day she had rouged her cheeks, which she hardly ever troubled to do. A pitiful attempt, perhaps, to combat the pall that had come over this place, and everyone in it.

She had once—I have seen earlier pictures of her—she had once been a rather beautiful woman, in a thin aloof sort of way. There was a tenuous delicacy about her face, with its thin, high-bridged nose and clear-cut profile, even yet. But she could not be considered beautiful now, with the harsh lines of petulance almost always conspicuous about her eyes and mouth.

"I think you are the luckiest person alive," she said, apparently to the river.

"I? In heaven's name why?"

Her eyes shifted hungrily to my plane, where it rode looking very patched and shabby in that merciless bright light. "Because you are the only one here who has the—the power to get away. Quickly and completely away."

"But——" I began.

She turned to me with such passionate suddenness that my voice broke off in my teeth.

"Joe, for God's sake—take me away from this place!"

She had never used my first name before, but the oddity of that was lost in the terrible rush of urgency with which she spoke.

"Panama or Cartagena"—the words tumbled out of her—"I don't care where, if only you'll take me out of this ghastly——" Her voice choked, though her eyes were dry, and it was a moment before she could go on. "Listen," she said more evenly, her voice full of a dry bitterness. "No one knows better than I do that I have nothing to offer any man. A few years ago it was different, but now——" She made a jerky gesture of despair. "This fever-ridden river has taken away from me everything I had. But Joe, I tell you this: anything I have, or all of myself, is yours to do with as you like, or throw aside as you like, if only you will take me out of this place!" All this, remember, in a voice repressed, half whispering, and yet of a terrible intensity. I wondered if that pathetic, unaccustomed appearance of the rouge was now explained; and I could not bear to meet her eyes. I think I have never pitied any living thing as much as I pitied Lucretia Heneshaw then.

I told her what I had to tell her, that the engine of my plane had been crippled in the night, and I was

now as earthbound as any of the others, or as she was herself. But, because the intensity of her appeal was too great to be ignored, I made a hurried computation concerning the capabilities of the Far Rivers launch.

"This I'll do," I told her. "I'll take you to Laguna in the launch."

"Laguna!"

"It's the only white station near the mouth of the Estrago—the only one on the Gulf of Tortugon, for that matter. I haven't time to take you farther, even if it were practicable in this wreck of a launch, which it is not. The boat is anything but seaworthy; but Laguna——"

"Any place in the world," said Lucretia in a faint voice, "*except* Laguna!"

"There isn't any other place available to the means at hand. From there you can——"

"No; I can't go to Laguna. I can't! Even to stay here is more possible than that."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you."

"I won't urge you," I said slowly. "If something happened here while I was gone, something I could

have prevented, I would never forgive myself, nor you."

She turned away from me. "I think," she said quietly, "I am going to go insane. . . ." Then she turned on me again, suddenly, as before. "*Then take Jane Corliss to Laguna*—or any place—by launch, or any way you can!"

"I thought," said I curiously, "that you disliked Jane—even hated her."

"I detest every move she makes, and everything about her," said Lucretia passionately. "But if you knew—I tell you, that girl is in danger here—terrible danger."

"You think——"

"Joe Macgregor, I tell you I know! In God's name, you have to believe me! I *know!*"

Almost the same words, I was thinking, that Flatfoot Walker had used, in another connection. Too many people here knew things they were unwilling to tell.

"Then you did discover something this morning?"

She turned her face away; but suddenly the words burst out of her in something like a gasp. "Yes, I did!"

"What was it?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you must, do you hear?" I took her by the shoulders, roughly, and turned her to face me. "You must! What was it?"

"I can't tell you—not you, nor anybody, ever while I live!"

That was an exasperating business. There between my hands was the key to all that had gone before or was to come after, concealed within that thin wisp of a woman; and I tell you I knew it then as well as I know it now. But what could I do, how could I get it out of her? For the moment I found myself balked completely, as I have been more than once in dealing with women. I was forced to admit that for the present I was turned back.

I let her go, and once more she leaned limply against the piling, with only her hands showing the nervous tension that never altogether left her.

"But you've got to take her away; you can take my word for that—you *must* take my word for it."

"She's unwilling to go."

"Then she must be forced!"

"Can anyone force that girl?"

She repeated that jerky gesture of despair. "Then —keep your eyes open. From this moment, you don't dare sleep or turn your back. Keep your eyes open,

as you love her! *Do* you love her?" she asked narrowly.

"Yes," I said.

"I thought so," said Lucretia dryly. She turned abruptly and went up the path.

CHAPTER VIII

When I got back to the house the others were turning their attention to the digging of a six-foot hole, and from somewhere out back came the sound of hammering as Doc Harmon laboriously knocked together a box. I went out and took my turn at the spade; then, drenched with sweat, I went back to the living room, and sat down to collect my wits. The place I chose to sit was Heneshaw's cot, as it happened; and instantly the spring of the cot let out its habitual shriek.

This suggested a readily tested speculation, and I began trying to see if I could put weight on that spring in such a way that it would remain silent. I suppose I spent a quarter of an hour at it. First I got down and peered underneath, to see what was the cause of the spring's distinctive noise, and found it to be a broken wire. Thereafter I tried letting my weight down on to that cot in every way I could think of—sitting on the foot of it, at the head, laying my weight cautiously along the side bar. In each case

the rickety construction of the thing defeated me. So far as I could discover, a silent approach to the thing was impossible.

Presently Jane Corliss came to the door of her room. "Do you have to do that?"

"Was I bothering you?"

"I was trying to take a nap. The nights just aren't sleepable around here. But if you've popped that spring once, you've popped it two hundred times."

"I'm sorry. By the way, where is Mrs. Heneshaw?

"I think she went out back, to boss operations out there."

"Jane—I want you to help me. You were here in the house while the rest of us were outside. Did you notice how Mrs. Heneshaw was putting in her time?"

"She was straightening up things, was all. You know how snappish she is; and when I had finished in the kitchen, and came in here, she got up and began fussing about. She has moods when she doesn't want to talk to anyone; and she'll put herself to any trouble to be unsociable—even to making herself useful."

"And do you know exactly what she was doing, after that, up to the time she went out?"

"Oh, I suppose so—I was helping her, as much as

anybody can help Lucretia when she's in a grouch. Just puttering around was all."

"This sounds foolish, Jane, but it's important—it may be damned important. Here's what I want you to do. I want you to act the part of Lucretia, and go through every least little move she made, as closely as you can, during the half hour before she went out."

"Oh, let's don't be idiotic, Joe——"

"Jane, that woman has discovered something."

"Discovered what?"

"That's what I want to find out. It was something that horrified her, I know that. It may be the king pin to this whole affair. And if we can pry it out, by combing over her every move——"

"But how do you know she found it out just at that time?"

"What was her general attitude this morning, before she went out of the house?"

"Snooty," said Jane instantly.

"There you have it. She is anything but snooty now."

Jane hesitated. She started to chew her finger, but checked herself. "Well, you might be right, but——"

"Why are you holding back? I know it's a nuisance, but——"

"It isn't that. I'm as willing to try anything as you are. But one of the things she did was to make her own bed, and there'll be some explaining to do if she catches us in her room."

"I'll take care of that."

"Well—all right."

Jane considered a minute or two, and an abstract look came into her eyes; then she began going through a series of petty, waspish motions, startlingly suggestive of Lucretia.

She acted the part of a fussy person straightening a room—adjusting a chair here, there making a futile flick of a handkerchief at a bit of dust.

"What's that you picked up?" I asked as Jane made an empty-handed placement.

"She picked up a piece of rag from behind this chair, and stuffed it behind the books. You know—shiftless. Now, that's funny! It's walked off."

"It's what?"

Jane felt behind the books. "It's gone—the rag I mean. I thought I remembered that one corner was sticking up. Well, she must have had a stroke of conscience, and put it where it belonged afterward. This all seems so silly, Joe."

"I know—but what kind of rag was it?"

"Dirty."

"Any engine grease on it?"

"There might have been."

"Well—go ahead."

Jane now went through the motions of tying Phil Heneshaw's mosquito netting back out of the way and making his bed. Then she stood for a moment or two uncertainly, her eyes moody on the floor, her hands engaged in motions unclear to me.

"What are you doing now?"

"She stood about here, sliding her ring back and forth on her finger. I said, 'I believe you're thinner, Lucretia,' and she gave me one of her snooty looks."

"Purely snooty?"

"Snootiness of the purest water. Then she dropped her ring, and it rolled under the bed. No, I didn't bother to go after it for her."

Jane dropped to her knees, groped under the bed; then for a few seconds her face was out of sight as she reached well under it. When she got up, her face flushed from bending, she went directly into Lucretia's room. Her movements were quicker, and more efficient for a few moments, as she sketchily pantomimed the making of Lucretia's bed.

"Any official snootiness here in the bedroom?"

"No—she was trying to pretend I no longer existed; though I was tucking in the other side for her."

From the bed Jane went to the wardrobe, which she opened. Here the quick appearance of efficiency went out of her, and she stood dimly fumbling at a row of dresses, something like an undecided person trying to make a selection.

"Stalling," I said.

"That was what she was doing when I went back into the living room," Jane said, becoming herself again; "and just a moment or two after that she fairly rushed out of the house. Well, do you get anything?"

"Oh, Jane, darned if I know." I lay prone on the living room floor and scrutinized the uninspiring terrain of matting under Heneshaw's cot. A big wolf spider ran out from under the baseboard, sighted me, and skittered back.

"Whatever Lucretia found under here is gone now —*if* this is where she found it," I reported. "Now, wait a minute."

I took my handkerchief and tried to pack it into the spring in such a way as to prevent the popping noise it liked to make; but it proved a more intricate job than you might suppose. In the end I scratched an

arm on a nail that stuck out of the matting, but achieved no other result. And I may as well say now that I never did find a silent way of getting on to that cot.

"You will insist on finding something wrong with that furniture," Jane sighed. "Poor old Joe! Crouching figures will come and go, and we'll all probably be murdered in our beds, but a month from now Joe Macgregor will still be sitting around with a dazed look, popping the cot. I'd get right to the bottom of that cot if I were you—take it all apart, and assemble it again——"

"No; I'm through with it now." I sat down on the edge of it, and the thing popped at me again, inanely punctuating my remarks. Jane was laughing at me.

"You seem to be permanently astounded by the fact that old Mr. Heneshaw was actually in bed and asleep when he was supposed to be."

"Maybe, after all, Lucretia found something in her own wardrobe."

"If we're going to look there," said she, "we'd better——"

We were not, just then, for Loftus came clumping on to the gallery with his shovel gang behind him, all of them covered with sweat and black mucky soil.

CHAPTER IX

We buried Harry Blackburn in the midday heat. When we had smoothed off the mound we all stood around, bareheaded, except Flatfoot Charley Walker, who had thoughtfully strolled off into the jungle at about the time he was due to take his turn at the shovel. Phil Heneshaw produced a Bible, and read such a lengthy selection that I wondered how many of us were in for a touch of sunstroke.

While Jane was opening canned goods for lunch I walked back among the grass huts, where had lived Heneshaw's few Indian servants and their more numerous kin. There were half a dozen rows of these, enough to accommodate the big gang of native laborers the banana company had employed before the war. Here was desolation, for most of the huts were in ruin, and already the jungle had come among them.

Among the huts I found little of interest, but one of the trails that led into the jungle behind them attracted my attention. Perhaps half a dozen little-used paths led back into the jungle from this part of the clearing. The Choco riverman, whatever his tempor-

ary employment, cannot live without having behind him his burrows into the jungle, which he uses for hunting or for the gathering of fruits. These invariably strike within a short distance into one of the criss-crossing game trails that the jungle animals keep partly open—vague, low tunnels very difficult for a white man to follow.

Now, I found that one of these jungle entrances was no Indian path, but what had formerly been a broad trail, with the ruts of cart wheels still visible at its edges, under the rank grass.

The jungle had done its best to close this track, and it had had time to succeed. But I saw at once that the trail had been partly reopened, here and there where vines completely blocked it, by someone with a machete. Closely examining the severed vines, I judged that someone had gone through here not more than a month before; and that this man had been a white man, since he had walked straight ahead with a free-swing slash where it was needed, instead of worming through as a native would have done.

Because of that month-old machete work the trail was fairly passable, and I traversed it for a few hundred yards, examining the ground. I was already beginning to wonder what had become of Walker.

Presently I was rewarded by the discovery of a heel mark, quite fresh.

I turned back to the house. Lunch still delayed—how slowly time passed in that sun-whipped clearing! Going inside, I found Phil Heneshaw sitting at his roll-top desk alone, the others—except for Jane, who was in the kitchen—having taken to the more airy shade of the front gallery.

It was the first time I had ever seen Heneshaw's desk open, and I half expected him to conceal its contents as I approached. But he smiled welcomingly, and went on niggling at a miniature map with a fine-pointed pen. I drew up a chair.

"Heneshaw, Dan Corliss is supposed to be over on the Rio de los Tres Gallos, isn't he?"

"Yes, indeed; what puzzles me is the length of time he's been gone. When he left here he expected to be gone only a week, or two at the most."

"He expected to get back from the Tres Gallos in a week? I should think it would have taken him that long to get to it."

"Oh, it would, by water. He went by the short cut—the old road, you know. Didn't you ever know about that old road? It starts right out here behind the huts. Here—let me show you."

He pulled a loose-leaf notebook from a long row of them at the back of the desk, and leafed through it with sensitive, fussy hands.

"I'm rather proud of my collection of maps," he told me. A certain warmth came into his face, changing it astonishingly. "Maps and charts are my hobby. A man goes crazy here without a hobby, and this is mine."

He laid the book open before me, to show a beautifully done little map, The page was perhaps six by nine inches, but it contained a wealth of detail, intricately drawn in three or four colors of inks. It showed the first thirty miles of the Estrago, and a portion of the Tres Gallos, which runs parallel to the Estrago, eighteen to thirty miles away.

"This is our station"—he pointed with his pen; "this is the little native village of Tambos, on the Tres Gallos. Here runs the former road—not very passable now—from here to Tambos: a distance of perhaps sixteen rather difficult miles. It may be twenty miles; it's hard to get these things right."

My wakeful commercial instinct made me wonder instantly what local resource had led the banana planters to hack out a road to Tambos, but I let it pass.

"Does Charley Walker know about the Tambos trail?"

"Oh, yes. I went over this whole thing with him, in speaking of Dan Corliss several days ago. I showed him this same map."

"Now, Dan Corliss left about a month ago, didn't he? And is now about three weeks overdue here?"

"Well, two or three."

"And yet he's sent no message of any kind—though he's supposedly only twenty miles away?"

Heneshaw smiled deprecatingly. "No; but you know how Dan is."

"How is it," I asked, "that no word has been sent for, then? I know Jane must have worried."

"Oh, no. She's used to having her father gone for indefinite periods. Once, she told me, he walked off into the jungle to shoot a cuchari, for meat, and was gone two weeks. An extraordinarily self-sufficient man, and very good at getting sustenance from the natives, or from the jungle itself."

"And very damned inconsiderate, I should say."

Again the deprecating smile. "Oh, well—these old trail makers . . . As a matter of fact, Mr. Macgregor, I have no idea that Dan has spent all this time at Tambos. Doubtless the spirit moved him to wander

off up the Tres Gallos. I've thought of sending a runner to locate him; but Jane would hardly be reassured to hear that his whereabouts were unknown, and that would almost certainly be the result. Frankly, I have been happy to have Jane here as long as possible. She's great company for Lucretia. Lucretia finds it so dull——"

"That's a pretty map," I cut into this windiness. "Do you have many like that?"

"I suppose," he said, "I have hundreds." He waved vaguely at the line of loose-leaf binders. "Yes, I am rather proud of them, I must confess. All my own work."

With the book exposed in front of me on the desk he leafed slowly through a dozen or so pages, giving me not too long a glimpse of each. A tantalizing performance, to anyone as interested in the details and the resources of that terrain as was I.

"Mostly based on old Spanish surveys, adjusted by the governmental data for navigators; the coast line, of course, is the foundation. The rest are mainly comparative versions of this quadrangle or that, which I owe to the kindness of many people. Then there is an interesting group comprising the less reliable reports of Indians."

He closed the book firmly, and put it back in its place. Now that Colombia has progressed from mule trails to skyways in one extraordinary stride, accomplishing in half a dozen years a work that would do credit to a century, the elementals of that country are a good deal better known. But in 1922 we made our own surveys, and guarded them jealously.

Jane now called us to lunch, and one by one we straggled to the rear gallery. Immediately the question arose of what had become of Charley Walker; and a new strain of alarm harassed the now unwilling inmates of the house of mahogany.

For reasons of my own I said nothing about the heel print in the Tambos trail. I didn't want that trail trampled by blundering feet until I could explore it at leisure. Heneshaw, evidently recalling Walker's knowledge of the old road, looked at me questioningly, but I shook my head, and he remained silent.

"Broad daylight," mumbled Harmon. "Something's happened. Something——"

Lucretia, white-faced except for the dark smudges under her eyes, put her handkerchief to her mouth and walked slowly to her room, wherein she shut herself. Buck Loftus swore, opened the screen door with a kick that nearly slammed it off its hinges, and went

barging off toward the huts. The rest of us followed.

For half an hour we beat the edge of the tangle at random, shouting Walker's name and searching the tall grass for the shape of a fallen man. Once the search hesitated at the overgrown mouth of the Tambos trail.

"I've looked in there," I said.

"You didn't find anything, no sign at all?" Harmon persisted.

"If you think I did," I evaded him, "go and look!"

"If Joe Macgregor didn't find anything," said Jane shortly, "the rest of you are wasting your time."

But it was not confidence in me, but the steamy choke of the jungle itself that turned them back, disgusted, after a penetration of a few yards.

Heat-draggled and sombre, we returned to the gallery at last. I think no one but myself doubted that another murder had been done, and I kept my own counsel. We ate little and silently, our eyes mostly on our plates.

From that meal I rose with three points fixed in my mind: for I had spent the whole of that luncheon covertly watching the hands of the rest. I knew now that Heneshaw's nails were unbroken and immaculately kept; that Harmon's nails were coarse and

blunt, unevenly trimmed, but apparently not broken; and finally, that Buckner Loftus had trimmed the nails of both hands almost to the quick—and this, I was absolutely certain, he had done since the night before. I remembered with perfect clarity the clicking tattoo of his fingers as he had leaned across the lamp-lit table, his irritated gaze pushing heavily against that of Flatfoot Charley.

After lunch I took the first opportunity that offered itself to speak to Jane alone.

"Who," I asked her abruptly, "would Lucretia Heneshaw try to protect?"

"Buck Loftus," said Jane instantly. "Now, you see, that was another foolish question, that fact being useless."

There was no reason, at this point, for telling her that the fact might prove anything but that.

"Where are your eyes, Joe Macgregor?" she went on. "It seems to me that I hardly ever look at Lucretia without finding her eyes on Buckner Loftus. How on earth do you keep from noticing anything?"

"I noticed that," I said slowly; "only, I would have said that to be looked at constantly by Lucretia was—well——"

"Ominous?" she suggested.

"Well, yes; that is, I mean——"

A little chuckle came into her throat. "Joe, you know absolutely nothing about women. Of course, I knew that before. I guess you're confusing her with Lucretia Borgia. Heneshaw is the name. Maiden name Jordan. Someone else entirely."

I was wondering reluctantly if there was going to be any reason later for recalling that coincidence of name. I said, "I should think at her age——"

"Oh, rubbish. Anyway, any woman is perfectly justified in looking at Buck Loftus. Now there is an eyeful of a man!"

"More like a truck load," I grumbled, and went away.

I went out on to the front gallery, where I took occasion to make a speculative survey of Buckner Loftus, where he sprawled on a chair too small for him, his great leonine frame luxuriously relaxed. Whatever that man had to conceal, it was certainly nothing that caused him to think anything but well of himself; a brute of a man, as thick-hided, in his own way, as Flatfoot Charley.

Looking at him you knew that all his life he had

been accustomed to overbear those about him. Even as a small boy he must have dominated his companions by the sheer, overgrown strength of his physique. His mind was like his body, strong, sound, fitted for overbearing its problems by weight of frontal advance.

Once I had seen Buck Loftus riding muleback down a disused trail and breaking with his hands obstructing branches that an ordinary man could not have struck off with a full swing of a machete. It was not hard to imagine Buckner Loftus breaking a human obstacle in the same manner, and with the same full appreciation of his own achievements. What I could not imagine, in the light of the incomplete information I had at that time, was Buckner Loftus moving silently, and in the dark. Still, I realized, I did not yet know this man well.

While I was at it I took a good look at Harmon. The fat driller seemed to have run out of fresh clothing, and the labor of digging in the muck had done him no good. His shirt was open halfway to the waist, and a steady trickle of perspiration ran off his chin and down his chest. He perpetually fanned himself, very red-faced and pop-eyed in the heat. A gross-bodied man, with shifty protuberant eyes, who con-

cealed behind layers of fat—or so report had it—a curiously tricky mind.

Dissatisfied and uncertain as ever, I went out the back of the house and once more entered the mouth of the disused road to Tambos, a choked scar in the face of the jungle behind the huts. Here, at least, a man could find tangible things, such as could be touched and surely read. The sun-slashed stream of the undergrowth was stifling, but so great was the relief of being alone, away from that house of malignant uncertainties, that the jungle choke was as grateful to me as the cool sweep of an open beach.

This time I pressed on steadily into the jungle, bothering less about possible imprints of Walker's heels. The trail opened as it struck deeper into the virgin jungle. Here it ran through a heavy shade not friendly to thorn and saw-grass, so that I found less frequently the month-old cuts where Corliss had struck through grape or liana.

I was sure by this time Walker had had enough of the Far Rivers clearing, and had struck out for Tambos. What I wanted to find was some evidence of his passage at a distance from the house—say a mile or two into the jungle—such as would assure me that he had actually made his get-away; for it was

heavy on my mind that we were not yet done with the death that had moved among us at the house of mahogany.

At the end of half an hour I had penetrated the jungle to the depth of more than a mile; and here I suddenly came into a little glade left open by the fall of a mighty tree. Into this air shaft the vertical sunlight struck fiercely, blinding me as I emerged from the shadows.

Here, upon the roots of the overturned monster, I found Walker's coat.

It puzzled me for a moment that a fleeing man should leave such a marker behind him. Then I remembered that the very act of flight brings panic, and makes men overlook obvious things. By this time I was fairly sure that Walker, rubber buyer though he called himself, was unaccustomed to the jungle; and this unfamiliarity in itself could have had immense effect.

A fresh-cut arm of liana, thrusting out of the wall of leafage like the head of a snake, now caught my eye at the very moment in which I was turning back, and caused me to make a closer examination. Now, as I studied the walls of this jungle air shaft, I learned a strange thing.

Into the jungle growths ran the smothered ruts of the vanishing wheel track, the jungle massing close above them. The writhing arms of a brotherhood of wrist-thick lianas overlocked the choked trail, reinforced by a lacing of smaller thorn-vine. These formed an impassable net work which had been cut through, not a month ago, but to-day.

Scrupulously I searched for the month-old cuts which would show me how Dan Corliss had made his way through; and when I failed to find them I searched for another outlet to that jungle shaft, for this far, at least, I knew Dan Corliss had come.

How long it had been since the great tree had fallen, letting an ever-decreasing blotch of pure sunlight reach the jungle floor, I do not know; but I am certain that the lianas, with their age-toughened parasitage of thorn-vines, must have begun growing soon after the abandonment of the wagon track in 1914. Around that light shaft in the jungle the quick growths had matted, dense and close, increasing their interlocking grip upon the tiny clearing during every hour of the years since the opening of the war. And I tell you, when I had completed an hour's examination, I knew beyond any trace of doubt that no man, Dan Corliss nor any other, had penetrated deeper than

this along that lost wagon trail, until Walker had cut a fresh way through this very day.

Thus far Dan Corliss had come, on his way to Tambos; and not one step beyond.

It was a thing I believed unwillingly, yet I could not avoid it. From this exact point Dan Corliss had vanished. I sat down on a root of the conquered tree, and tried to imagine where Dan Corliss might be now, and what might have befallen him, here in this smashing shaft of light.

Most of all I was wondering how I was to tell Jane of what I had learned. I walked back to the house of mahogany with a heavy reluctance upon me.

That night Lucretia Heneshaw died.

CHAPTER X

The death of Lucretia, and the manner of her death, were of such obvious and sinister significance as to dwarf and overshadow all the other developments of the day; for they told us definitely that tragedy had not yet run its course in the mahogany clearing, that the malignancy which had taken Harry Blackburn still waited, hidden, among us.

Lucretia, I knew, had made a discovery that had terrified her. Whether or not the knowledge she had thus gained had provided the whole motive of this new crime, I was at that time unable to judge. But instinctively I felt that it had not. I was beginning to feel that there was a larger, more systematic motive behind, demented and incomprehensible though it might be. This suspicion, you can imagine, did nothing toward clearing the welter of confusion already in my mind. For hours after Lucretia's death my almost panicky desire to come to grips with the persisting menace so distorted my sense of proportion that I was able to do nothing toward fitting together the other facts that the day had yielded.

The afternoon had brought developments of its own.

When I had definitely ascertained that Dan Corliss had never reached Tambos—had, in fact, proceeded no more than the first mile on the way—I returned to the house of mahogany, and immediately sought out Jane, for though I dreaded the necessity of telling her of what I had learned concerning her father I was anxious to get the business over with. Once more luck was with me, and I had no trouble in drawing her apart from the rest.

We strolled side by side toward the landing. I could not find suitable words for breaking the news to her; and finally I merely opened my mouth and came out with the facts.

"Jane, I've been a little way along this wagon trail, back here, and I have to tell you something. Your father never reached Tambos."

She seemed so little affected that I thought she had not understood me; but after a moment she said in a low voice, "Joe—I know it."

"Then you know where he is?"

Her fingers twisted together for a moment, but dropped to her sides again as she spoke.

"No, I don't. That's just the trouble."

"But, how did you know, then, that he wasn't at Tambos?"

"I walked up that old wagon trail one day, the way we supposed Dad had gone. It gets pretty—tiresome here, sometimes; and I had nothing else to do."

"I think," I said, "that 'tiresome' was not the word you started to use."

She disregarded my implied question. "I haven't been raised in jungles, exactly, but I guess I know enough about this sort of country to know the end of a machete trail when I come to it."

We stood silent for a bit, under the cypress which overhung the dark water.

"Jane, could you bear it to learn that your father is—is——"

"Dead?" she supplied. She turned her face to me with a movement quick and intense. "You've—found him?" she said, little over a whisper.

"No; but it's very queer, Jane, the way that trail ends; and no word from him at all, or any sign. Have you any idea what could have happened to him, or where he could be?"

"I suppose," she said, "I've asked myself that question every hour of every day since I first walked up that trail two weeks ago."

"Did you tell anyone what you found out?"

"Whom would I tell?"

There was, I thought, a world of significance in that answer. What courage there was in that slender girl! Two weeks of wondering, of dread, of suspense —and all alone: or as good as alone, since the Heneshaws evidently had proved so little kind, or so little understanding, that it had not occurred to her to turn to them with her troubles. I blamed the environment that had so long oppressed them, rather than the Heneshaws themselves. And as for Harmon, or Walker——

But what I could not understand was why she had not turned to Buck Loftus.

"Of course," Jane said, "I thought right away that something terrible must have happened to Dad, there at the end of the trail. I suppose you always think first of the very thing you fear the most. But, Joe, I think Dad is alive."

"I haven't any doubt," I tried to reassure her, "that one of these days he'll turn up with——"

"No, I'm not just pulling some of this hope-for-the-best stuff, Joe. There was something kind of queer happened, the night after he left, something that I didn't understand at the time; but since I've

known that he never went through to Tambos, it makes me think that Dad is alive—somewhere."

"And what was that?"

"Well, you know, for years Dad carried a little .22 automatic, not much good, but he liked it because it couldn't be seen, and was always with him. Well, recently he decided that this was a silly habit; he guessed there was nothing 'worser'n he was' in the jungle anyway, and besides he couldn't hit anything with it if he had to. So he said he wanted me to have it.

"On the morning he left we both forgot all about it, and he went off without giving it to me. I'm sure he took the automatic with him, for he left all his things neatly packed in a little trunk that's under my bed, and that's not been unlocked since he left.

"Then, some time during the night—the same night after he left—somebody put that little gun on my window sill."

"Did you hear them, or see them?"

"No; but in the morning there it was, leaning against the screen. I know it was put there during the night because the last thing I did when I went to bed was to push open that screen and whip the mosquitoes out."

"Have you told anyone else?"

"No; I didn't want to hear them make fun of the little popgun, after all those years Dad carried it."

"Jane, was your father a secretive sort of man?"

"No! Anything but that. His one greatest fault is his absolutely bull-headed belief that everyone is just as square as he is. The funny thing is, expecting a square deal that way, he usually gets it. This stealthy way of doing business, that everyone else seems to have down here, is something that he'll never in the world get the hang of. In some ways Dad is just a child. Joe, what do you think about it?"

"Dan Corliss is alive all right. Evidently, something happened that suddenly changed this open way of his—something that forced him to reverse his whole way of thinking, and made him conceal where he was going and what he was about, even from you."

"Now you see why I couldn't very well tell anyone what I'd learned?"

"I think," I said, "that the old—your father might have let you in on the deal, under the circumstances. There's no doubt in my mind that he made a feint at Tambos, took a nap in the jungle, then walked back, right through this place, and went off up the river on some private look-see of his own."

"Do you think so? Because that's what I've been almost certain of all along. Only—it seems so positively uncanny to think of Dad prowling back through the clearing in the night—so absolutely unlike anything he ever did in his life."

I was thinking the same thing; and wondering what mystery had suddenly broken Dan Corliss's faith in human nature and turned him to the secretiveness he had always despised. I packed the question away, among the many I had accumulated. One feeling I had about this whole situation—that when I had found the answer to any one question, I would have the answer to them all.

Dusk came on, and we ate. Lucretia appeared at the dinner table for a short space, looking very haggard and miserable, and went back to her room again after a brief pecking at her food.

After dinner I went down to the landing with only a bottle of mosquito dope for company, and sat for a long time against a piling, going over my ragged fragments of information—or pretending to—to myself. The truth was that my mind would turn to little else but Jane.

Walker's flight had more than half the appearance of confessed guilt; and, weary as I was, I was perhaps

too ready to believe that the horror which had walked the clearing had passed on, and that nothing remained for me to do but to locate Jane's father, and get her established in a happier place. An attractive task, since the service of Jane was in it; a good deal unlike the grubbing in horror that had been forced upon me in the last twenty-four hours.

Already I was picturing Panama, and Jane and me dining together on the veranda of a good American hotel, with an orchestra in the background playing the tarantella. . . .

From the house of mahogany came a sudden stir, a new mutter of voices. Someone overturned a chair. Behind me on the path sounded a quick flutter of running feet, and Jane rushed almost into my arms.

"Joe, come quick! Something's happened to Lucretia!"

"What is it?" I trotted beside her as she turned and ran back up the path.

"It's—oh, Joe, it's that same strangle in her throat —the same I heard for so long last night, when Harry Blackburn died!"

We raced into the house, and in Lucretia's room joined the silent group which stood, lamps in their hands, around her bed. But there was not in Lucretia

the tough, stubborn, drawn-out fight for life that Harry Blackburn had made. Before ever I reached her side Lucretia Heneshaw was dead.

There was, I saw, the same dark discoloration of the skin as had characterized Harry Blackburn's case.

Of the circumstances of her death, there seemed to be little to learn. Jane had heard Lucretia call out an unintelligible word or two in a choked voice, and had instantly gone to her, taking a light. By the time she reached the bed the strangle was already in Mrs. Heneshaw's throat, so that she was beyond speech. Jane had called the others, then come directly to me. It had been a quick end, as if all the vitality in Lucretia had been on the surface, with nothing at all behind. Sometimes I think she was glad to die, this woman whose life had contained so little that was satisfactory to her.

Doc Harmon was the first to break the silence when we stood in the living room again, watching each other curiously.

"Why—why—" his voice quavered—"damn it, damn it, this is ghastly! Three—do you realize it? In twenty-four hours. Good God! What's happening in this house?"

"I suggest," said I—my voice seemed hard and

strange to me—"that this time the examination be made at once, and in the presence of everyone. And if you think I'm pushing on the reins, I'll tell you this: if you had made an immediate examination, a thorough one, and at once, in the case of Harry Blackburn instead of letting Walker alone to do as he pleased, you would all be less in the dark to-night."

There was a long pause.

"It seems——" Harmon began falteringly.

"No!" Heneshaw broke in with such sudden passionate vehemence that Harmon jumped. "No, I tell you! No one shall touch her! Do you think——"

His voice cracked, and he suddenly sat down, elbows on knees, his face averted. There was another awkward silence.

"Suppose," said Jane's cool voice, "that I make the examination, Mr. Heneshaw?"

"It's a brutal thing to ask of any woman," said Harmon.

"Let her," said Heneshaw, without raising his head. "I'll accede to that; and that's all I'll accede to."

"Everyone trusts her, I think," said I; "but I tell you——"

"Go ahead, Jane," said Loftus.

Jane looked at me. "Now?"

Reluctantly I nodded. "Better take at least two lamps."

While Jane was in Lucretia's room there was another silence, so that the time seemed longer than it was. I suppose it was actually no more than two minutes before she reappeared, looking very pale and shaky.

"Well?" Loftus said.

"Nothing," said Jane.

"No blowgun dart," suggested Harmon, "nor mark of any kind?"

"Nothing," said Jane again.

"Nothing in the throat?" I asked.

"No; I especially looked to that."

She crossed to me, and handed me a little ball of paper.

"What's that?" demanded Loftus.

"It's a note," said Jane, "that was crumpled up in Lucretia's hand."

"My God!" cried Harmon, his eyes popping out of his red face, "and she says there was nothing!"

"And why," rumbled Loftus, "do you give it to him, may I ask, the only one here that we know had a——"

"Because," said Jane, "it was addressed to him."

Their eyes bored into me as I smoothed out that crumpled scrap and turned so that the lamplight fell upon it. Loftus and Harmon crowded up to peer over my shoulder. Well, let them, thought I.

There were eight words, penciled in a wavering scrawl:

Joe MacGregor—It is darkest under the . . .

The last word trailed off, completely undecipherable.

"Was the pencil there?" I asked.

"On the floor beside the bed."

"Does anyone," I asked, "think he knows the last word?"

"Cot," said Loftus idiotically. They all knew, I guess, about the time I had wasted popping poor Heneshaw's spring.

"'Darkest under the light' is the correct expression," came Heneshaw's voice, as dry and thin as if the man had turned to dust.

"And why addressed to you, can a man ask?" Loftus boomed at me.

I did not answer. As I thrust that bit of paper into

my trousers pocket I was thinking of my last talk with Lucretia, in which she had warned me of a nameless danger hanging over Jane Corliss.

Heneshaw rose, his face gaunt and gray as a ghost. Everyone knew that more or less of an estrangement had come between Phil and Lucretia; but I think that night Phil Heneshaw was realizing what she had been before the jungle took away her laughter and her youth, and what she had meant to him, long ago. Something that had hitherto sustained him, I think, broke away within the man that night, for never while I knew him—or while he lived, I believe—did his face look the same again.

He went out across the front gallery, stoop-shouldered and with irregular steps, and wandered slowly off into the night.

CHAPTER XI

With the death of Lucretia the discovery that she had made was put farther than ever beyond my reach. It cannot be said that the fact that she had stumbled upon perished with her—does any fact ever perish?—but more was going to happen in that house before I found out what it had been.

When Heneshaw had gone out, four of us remained: Jane Corliss, Doc Harmon, Buckner Loftus, and myself. Except for Heneshaw, we four were all that were alive and accounted for out of eight who had gathered in this room twenty-four hours before.

"I want your help," I told Buck Loftus.

He regarded me sidelong—a stubborn, half-baffled attitude I had not seen him take before—while almost half a minute passed. "What do you want to do?" he said at last.

"Poison has been used here, twice, and perhaps four times," I said. "I want a thorough ransack of this house, and especially a turn-out of every medicine kit here."

"Four?" said Harmon in an odd voice.

"My father is missing, you know," Jane said softly. I would not have used the word "four" if I had not been certain that this possibility was already in her mind.

"The medicine kits," said Buck slowly, eyeing Harmon. "I don't know but what he's got the answer to something, Doc. Of course, in Harry's case, it was the dart; and Jane may have missed——"

"I think not," I said. Now I told them of Walker's curious experiment with the blowgun dart, which had supposedly killed Harry Blackburn; and while I was at it I told them his story about the head of the Choco doll, which the rubber buyer claimed to have found wedged in Blackburn's throat.

"And you kept all this to yourself," Harmon ranted. "Until," he added, "it was too late for Walker to verify this, or deny it!"

"I think," I said, "it is not too late for him to verify or deny what he pleases."

"There's more you haven't told us?" Loftus demanded angrily.

"There is more. Walker's heel prints are plain to be seen in the trail to Tambos; and his coat is hanging on a root, one mile down the trail. Gentlemen, our friend Flatfoot has lammed."

"And how can we believe anything *you* say?" Harmon shrilled, his jowls shaking.

"If you can read a trail you can go and look. Or if you want to go to Tambos you will probably either find Walker, or some news of him, among the natives there."

"You mean to stand there," said Buck, "and tell me you've let a murderer slip out of our hands?"

"I'm not interested in who slips out of whose hands. All I want is to prevent further disaster; and I am asking you to coöperate with me in taking common-sense precautions!"

"And suppose," said Harmon, "we're not interested in furthering any of your plans whatsoever?"

"Then," said I, angering at last, "I'm going to ransack this house myself, beginning with your own things, and Buck's; and not you, nor Loftus, nor all hell is going to stop me!"

There was a significant silence, while Harmon and Loftus looked at each other. Harmon I was not interested in; it was Buckner Loftus I was watching. And I saw that he looked at Harmon unseeing, while he made certain calculations in his own mind.

"The worst of it is, he's right," Loftus said to Harmon at last. "I don't like his style any better

than you do; but we can't lay off a necessary job because he suggested it. After all, we haven't proved anything on him yet, and until we do, he has some rights, I suppose."

"Oh, Buck," cried Jane, "why can't you all work together?"

"We're going to," I grinned. "Can't you see how eager these fellows are to have everything go smoothly?"

"We might go through your stuff first, Macgregor," Loftus suggested.

"Fair enough."

That was a long night. Systematically we went through every room in that house, with the exception of Jane's, and it was very slow work. Gradually we collected on the living-room table a considerable store of little bottles—chiefly the things you would expect in anybody's medicine kit in the tropics.

Heneshaw wandered back into the house in time to help us go through his own belongings, and here we acquired a great raft of chemicals, photographic, mineral testing, and miscellaneous.

"This is hopeless," said Loftus, when we were finished.

Besides the medicines and chemicals, we had run

onto many a detail relevant of human nature and of the private lives of those who had been living in the house of mahogany, but without finding anything of use. It was no good to us to know that Walker was corresponding with nine illiterate girls in Colón, or that Harmon was partial to rubbing tonics into his hair, or that out of twenty-two snapshots Loftus carried, sixteen were of himself. The whole business was a tiresome, fruitless, and sometimes disgusting job.

"Look at that mess of bottles!" growled Loftus irritably. "There might be fifty poisons, for all you know, and how are you going to test them out? For that matter, I could take my own rock-testing acids and reactives, and mix up dope enough to rub you all out."

It seemed unwise for me to force the lead any more than I had to; so now I waited for the obvious suggestion to come from someone else. It was certain to come; though I was surprised that it was Heneshaw who stepped into the breach.

"I suggest," he said in a voice thin but controlled, "that you have started at the wrong end. If I suspected a poison I would seek to know how it was administered. The medicine kits are the natural key:

the medicine kits of—of those who have died." He faltered, but immediately recovered himself. "Of course, in Blackburn's case——"

It was necessary to repeat to him Walker's refutation of the poisoned-dart theory, together with the story, less significant in this connection, of the Choco doll's head.

The horror of this last seemed to put the old man temporarily out of commission; but Loftus saved me the necessity of taking the lead again.

"Blackburn's whole kit was buried at the bottom of his packs, except for two items," he pointed out; "his mosquito dope and his quinine. The food he ate was the same as the rest of us; his quinine he took alone."

"Exactly," said I.

"Then what the devil was the idea," Harmon exploded, "of hauling out all my hair tonic?"

"It afforded a good chance of looking into your personal affairs," I told him coolly. "Also—it will tell us nothing to find poison in Blackburn's quinine unless we locate a similar material elsewhere."

Buck Loftus dumped out Blackburn's quinine capsules, and broke open half a dozen of them, one by one, onto a sheet of paper. This he repeated with

the quinine taken from Lucretia's room. Out of the capsules he poured little heaps of white powder.

"Now, Macgregor," Loftus asked. "how are you going to test this poison? Chemically?"

"It can't be done," said Heneshaw, "with the reactives we have at hand. I know little chemistry, but I know that there are a dozen poisons that would elude any test we have the equipment to make."

"At least, we can test for arsenic and strychnine."

"Do those turn the skin black?" said Loftus contemptuously. "Do you think you're smart enough to take a couple of acids and detect a poison you never heard of? Or," he added heavily, "have you heard of it, and know all about it, perhaps?"

"I do not," I said.

There was a silence. "We might catch a lizard," began Harmon, "and——"

"Quinine will kill a lizard," Loftus snapped at him.

Heneshaw reached slowly to the two medicine bottles in question, and shook one more capsule out of each.

"I had hoped," I admitted, "that something else would come out of those capsules—something obviously not quinine."

"You had hoped," Harmon sneered. "And we've

wasted half a night!" He was not going to forgive me readily for digging up that extensive array of hair tonics.

"There is one test," said Heneshaw in a queer voice.

I saw the trembling of his hands, and a certain glazed look in his eyes that might have been madness. Suddenly I remembered Walker's mad experiment.

The array of bottles on the table crashed to the floor as I sprang headlong across the table; but I seized Heneshaw's wrist before he could carry those capsules to his mouth.

"Let me alone," he urged in a curiously even voice. He was jammed hard back in his chair, struggling feebly under my weight. "Let me alone! I tell you, I know quinine when I see it!"

"You fool," I told him, getting the capsules out of his fist, "one grain of cyanide in that stuff would finish you before we could turn you over!"

"Gentlemen," he said, his face ghastly, "in view of what has happened here to-night, that was my hope."

For the moment, no one bothered to clear up the shattered bottles, nor even to right the overturned table. We sat in silence about the wreckage of the glassware and one of the lamps, which had been on

the table but failed to catch fire in the crash. We were weary with strain and lack of sleep, the five of us who were left of eight, but no one thought of turning in.

"The Laguna launch is due to-morrow," Buck Loftus reminded us. "Is there anyone who is *not* leaving on that launch?"

No one spoke. I looked at Jane questioningly. "Yes, I'm willing to go now," she agreed, her voice very low.

As she spoke one of the two remaining lamps trembled and died, having exhausted its kerosene. The little light that was left seemed very dim and thick; and I seemed to feel the black jungle, ancient, formless, and sentient, come a step nearer, closing inexorably about the house beside the silent Estrago.

CHAPTER XII

INACTION was intolerable. I was very anxious that Jane Corliss at least should get some sleep; but before urging this I set out to take every precaution for her safety that my ingenuity could devise.

In the first place, I smashed up several heavy crates that I found in the storeroom, and nailed these like bars across the outside of both her windows. Dissatisfied with this, I unhinged the doors of two of the other rooms—my own and Harmon's—and with these masked her windows from the inside. These doors I braced two feet from the window frames, so that there was room for circulation of air; but no blowgun dart could now enter the room, and even a bullet would have had to be fired blindly.

The partition between Jane's room and the storeroom was very flimsy, so I corrected this deficiency by locking the storeroom and jamming the lock with buckshot. Finally, I showed her how to jam a pencil through the handle of her key, after her door was locked, and brace the pencil against the knob, so the

key could not be turned with tweezers from the outside.

She smiled at me, her eyes steady and courageous, as she said good-night. When her door had closed the house of mahogany became more than ever ugly and desolate. I knew that, in spite of all my precautions, there remained a certain amount of uncertainty that I would ever see her again. That was the sort of girl who can transmute the whole soul of a man—turn a turtle into an eagle, or a rabbit into a fighting fool, and fill his life with either hell or glory. I no longer tried to conceal from myself that all the light the world held for me was in Jane Corliss's eyes.

With the closing of her door the four of us that remained in the living room were better able to see one another as we were. Heneshaw, in his present broken condition, seemed a doddering old imbecile. The rest of us were no better than three antagonistic animals.

"Now, you two," I swung on them, ignoring Heneshaw, "what do you want to make of it? I say we may as well let the old man turn in. The other three of us can take turns getting a little rest: two to watch each other and one to sleep, four hours on and two off."

That neither of them trusted me, any more than I

trusted either of them, was so obvious as to need no mention among us.

"There's little enough of the night left," Loftus rumbled. "I'm going to sit it out. To-morrow afternoon we'll be in the Gulf of Tortugon, and then will be time enough for sleep."

"Same here," said Harmon. "I'm going to keep an eye on my own hide until we're out of here. Do what you want to, Macgregor."

"I know this much," I grinned at them. "You two haven't got it in you to get together on anything; so I guess the house is safe. But in case you haven't noticed it, I've worn a .45 automatic in a shoulder holster under my shirt ever since Harry died."

"Well, we can see it!" growled Loftus blackly.

"Just a little detail you all might bear in mind," I explained.

Taking a chair to the gallery, I set its back against the one of Jane's windows that opened to the front, and settled myself there to catch what sleep I could. Yet I could not sleep until I had loosened my automatic in its holster, and fixed one hand upon its grip. Thus we got through the night; and in spite of twenty reasonless awakenings, the morning found me refreshed.

Our first task, of course, was the burial of Lucretia Heneshaw at the edge of the clearing beside Harry Blackburn. When this was done we packed and portaged to the landing such personal baggage as we were taking with us.

The Laguna launch came roaring up the river at eleven-thirty, a forty-five foot, heavily powered cabin boat, strong enough to make a good fight of it in an off-coast blow. The wonder was that she was able to get this far up the river without grounding more often than she did. The greatest—indeed almost the only—expense the Far Rivers Mahogany outfit was sustaining at this post was the cost of bringing this oil-company launch twenty-five miles up the river once every two weeks.

We heard her coming a long way off, and all of us but Harmon were down at the landing to meet her. The fat driller had relaxed his intention of staying awake, daylight and a jolt of rum having bolstered his courage somewhat, and he had gone to sleep in the course of the morning. At the last minute we had got him partly awake, and he had started packing his things at last, hours after everyone else's baggage was waiting on the landing.

The little sea-going launch was a grateful sight as

she breezed up the last long reach, turning aside the dark water in two rolls of green that ran out and out behind her to smash against the muck at the roots of the cypress. She shut down and coasted the last twenty fathoms, and came abreast of the landing.

Then, instead of nosing in, she stood idling her brute engines against the current, a good thirty yards away in the midstream. There was something hesitant about old Lonnie Riley, her engineer, as he came to the rail and returned our wave.

"Well, come on in!" Heneshaw hailed him. "You've got plenty of water!"

"Stand back if you want me to come in," Riley yelled. "I'll land your stuff when you've stood back from that landing, and not a minute before!"

"What the devil's the matter with you?" roared Loftus. "Get the hell in here before I——"

"You know well enough what's the matter," Riley shouted back. "It's the black plague is on you, and I'm sorry about it too, but be damned if I come to that dock while you breathe the air!"

"Black plague your eye," bellowed Loftus. "What kind of damned foolishness is this?"

"That yalla boy of yours brought the word to the coast," Riley told us. "If there's nothing the matter

here, where's that fella Walker? Where's Mrs. Heneshaw that never yet missed the boat? Where's that other fella, Harry somebody, that brought the plague out of the jungle?"

Loftus shouted, "Walker's at Tambos, and Harry Blackburn's dead of a blowgun shot. Great God, haven't we enough trouble here without you going nuts over a fool yellow boy's lie?"

"You idiot, black plague is carried by rats," shrilled Heneshaw.

"I know nothing," said Riley, "of all that. . . ."

After that, much more of the same. But that stubborn Irishman held to his intention, and matters were not helped by the terrific roar of blasphemy that Buck Loftus presently turned upon him. Riley was afraid it would get out on him that he had touched at a plague spot, and that his boat would be quarantined at Cartagena. In the end we gave up, and retreated from the landing, though not until Riley had turned his launch in the stream, preparatory to going away. Dismally we watched from a distance of a hundred paces while Riley unloaded our supplies, keeping as he did so a wary eye on Loftus, whom he suspected, with some reason, of hoping to board him by force.

"I don't want to be hard on you people," Riley called when he had safely backed out again. "There's fresh medicines there—some of everything we got at Laguna. I'll try to shanghai you a doctor, if you say the word."

"To hell with your doctor!" Loftus yelled at him. "And if ever I get my hands on you, you——"

Just as the launch was pulling away Doc Harmon came bursting out of the house, yelling at the top of his lungs for Riley to wait. He came galloping down to the landing with a shirt tail ballooning behind him, his arms full of stuff he had failed to wedge into that preposterous bulging grip of his. The grip itself was trying to disgorge its contents from one unlatched corner as it banged against his thighs at every stride.

At the landing he stood yelling and thrashing his fat arms like a madman until the launch was altogether out of sight; and long after the rest of us had returned to the house he stood there still, pulling at a pendulous lower lip as he stared, incredulously, down the empty river.

Buck Loftus and I worked all afternoon over the engine of the Far Rivers launch, which was now our only reasonable means of getting away from that black trap of a clearing.

Except for three dugout pirogues, such as are almost impossible for a white man to get the hang of, the launch was all we had that would float. There were three or four American freight canoes lying about, but neglect had rendered them no better than sieves. Experience told me that, though I might get a pirogue to the coast alone, I would never make it with four passengers—and would swamp in the Gulf of Tortugon if I did. Harmon was useless on the water, and Loftus could not even swim.

The alternative was a twenty-five-mile machete fight through the river jungle, followed by a thirty-mile march along the beach.

We found the batteries of the launch worthless, and the whole ignition system in almost hopeless condition. After a half day's concentrated effort we at last managed to get a few half-hearted coughs out of her, by spinning the engine on the generator. By dark even Buck's great strength was exhausted by labor at the crank, and we were forced to rest the project.

The jungle seemed closer about us that night, darker and more ugly. We divided our scant remaining kerosene between two lamps, but though the wicks were trimmed and retrimmed, they gave only

a dim and smoky light. The heat, the burning kerosene, and the Colombian rum with which Harmon had saturated himself became steadily more oppressive, and in all the heat-drenched jungle there seemed to be not the least stir of air.

After supper Jane held a flashlight while Loftus and I worked over the engine of the launch for two or three hours more, without result; and at ten-thirty we plodded back to the house, admitting our defeat. Buck Loftus, who had had less sleep than I, was staggering with exhaustion. He would not admit it, nor give up; but Jane took pity on us both, and went to the rear gallery to make more coffee.

"One thing remains," said I. "When we've had our coffee we'll go aboard the launch, with three days' supplies, and cut adrift. Whether we ever get the engine going or not, we'll make the coast on the current in a couple of days; and after that we'll just have to walk the beach to Laguna."

Heneshaw shook his head slowly. "I'll stay here," he said.

"You will not," said I. "You'd go crazy here, and you know it."

"That's all right," said Loftus, "only why not wait for morning? We'll hang up in the mud every fifty

yards, in the dark, and won't make two miles between now and daylight. Meantime everyone in the launch will be exposed to the same dangers, if any, that we're exposed to right here. Besides that, everyone will be mosquito-bit into twenty different fevers, and we'll be a fine mess by the time we get to Laguna. All to gain a distance we would make in an hour, and easily, by daylight."

"It is a little extravagant, Macgregor," Heneshaw said. "Personally I feel that we are now as safe here as anywhere. What more can happen to us now? And always remember—the most suspicious character among us has fled to Tambos, which he would hardly have done if he had been an innocent man."

"It isn't as if," said Harmon, "that fever-river was a healthy place, itself."

"I realize," said Heneshaw, "your solicitude for Miss Corliss, Macgregor. It is very touching, I'm sure. But how could she, in any case, be safer than she can be now in her own room, with all the extraordinary barricades you have put up around it?"

I was ready by this time to jump to my feet and lay down the law, whether they liked it or not; for although what they said was reasonable enough, I had no liking for that house of mahogany. But Jane

came to the door long enough to say, "Joe, you know they're right." And I prepared to give in.

"With the lights burning all night——" began Heneshaw.

"And what," I demanded, "are you going to burn in the lights? Cooking grease?"

"Didn't the Laguna launch bring a drum of kerosene?"

"It did not," said Loftus. "You mean to say there isn't any except in these two——"

"I don't believe there's another drop in the place," Heneshaw said.

We fell silent, grown men curiously appalled by the idea of spending a night in the dark. Well, we could rig some kind of lights, I supposed.

In the silence my ears played me tricks, putting mysterious meanings into the small noises of the night jungle. Off somewhere in the thickets something made a scramble, and was silent again. Nearer, much nearer, within the clearing itself, I thought I caught the snap of a twig.

I closed my eyes, listening. My tired and overwrought nerves half convinced me that I was conscious of soft footfalls, through moments in which nothing was actually heard. It was as if my ear was

hearing something too faint to reach the conscious mind, but which was distinct enough to stir old memories and old fears. I felt that someone, something, unaccounted for and unknown, was coming toward us through the dark, across the graves of Lucretia and Harry Blackburn, out of the miasma of the jungle itself. . . .

"Oh, hell!" said Buck Loftus. "If it's come to the point where four Americans with flashlights and guns are afraid of the dark, we'd better all go back to the States, and stay there, too. I tell you frankly, I'm ashamed of the company I'm in!"

"That's what I say," said Harmon. "Only——"

"Only what? You're an old woman, Harmon! I doubt if you've bossed a drill crew in fifteen years—if you ever did!"

"Now, say," Harmon blustered. "I——"

"Listen!" Heneshaw cried suddenly. His eyes were popping.

Silence again, nothing but the silence, unbroken.

"I don't hear anything," said Loftus after a minute.

"Something," said Heneshaw, "is prowling around the outside of this house!"

"But we're all in here," said Harmon queerly, glancing over his shoulder.

Suddenly my heart froze in my throat, stopping my breath, and my muscles snapped rigid, catapulting me out of my chair. From the kitchen on the rear gallery Jane Corliss had screamed once, terribly; and there was the crash of a smashed lamp. Then silence again, as if the darkness had closed her mouth, like a hand.

CHAPTER XIII

Buck Loftus, being nearer the door, reached the rear gallery before I. Whether Jane Corliss stumbled into his arms, or whether she fell and he caught her up, I don't know. But the next I saw of her she was being carried, limp in Buck's arms, into the faint shaft of light from the living-room door. Her head hung backward from the crook of his elbow, so that her throat was a pale curve, and her profile white and waxen against the night.

Buck was babbling, "Are you hurt? Are you hurt?"

Jane's lips moved. "No," she gasped.

"What is it? What's happened?"

"A face," she whispered. "I saw a face—beyond the screen."

I do not remember drawing my automatic, but it was already in my hand as I kicked the screen door open, nearly lifting it from its hinges. I was set on rushing out, to make a mad search of the dark clearing, but on the threshold I caught myself, and stopped.

At the bottom of the steps a figure stood, swaying on wide-set legs. At first I did not recognize Flatfoot Charlie Walker, so changed he seemed in that inadequate light. Then my anger overwhelmed me, and I went down the steps in a stride. My impulse was to smash down the prowler with the flat of my automatic. I don't know why I did not. Perhaps because his eyes stared at me blankly, only half seeing, and he made no move to protect himself.

"Didn't mean to scare nobody," he mumbled. "Touch of fever, I guess; I missed the door."

"Go on in the house," I ordered him, standing aside.

He stumbled over the top step as he lurched in to lean against the wall by the door. I have never seen a more complete wreck made of any man by two days of jungle trail. The proudly glaring silk shirt was no more than a neckband and a memory—just a tatter of sweat-drenched rags behind which the white skin was marked by the long red scratches of thorns. His colorless hair shagged over his eyes, and his face was welted and scarred by thorns and the stings of insects.

Buck Loftus whimpered curses. "You come sneaking around here, will you——" Gently he lowered Jane into a chair and took a long step toward Walker.

"You stand back!" I told him, snapping up my automatic. "This man's out on his feet!" Loftus wavered and stopped.

Heneshaw began in a muffled voice: "To what are we indebted for this unexpected——"

"Where have you been?" I demanded of Walker. "Or—what's more to the point—why have you come back?"

"One of you knows," said Flatfoot Walker, "who I came back for."

There was a silence. "Do you know?" I asked.

"No," said he, and dropped into a chair, where he sprawled like something that had been dumped there. "But I will soon, now. Mark me—by tomorrow noon, I'll know."

"We thought you took a run-out powder," I said.

"I went to Tambos," Walker answered. "When I tell you what I found out there, you'll know why I went: *Dan Corliss never got to Tambos.*"

"Is that all you found out?" I asked.

"That's all I went there to find out."

"You mean you whacked through that whole twenty miles——"

"If that's only twenty miles——" said Walker, his voice heavy and thick with fatigue.

An outrageous impulse to laugh almost overwhelmed me, as I pictured the fellow fighting all day long to reach a piece of information that both Jane and I had acquired not one mile from home. Certainly there is a curious blindness in the eyes of men unaccustomed to jungles.

"Now there's something I want to know," said Walker, mumbling wearily. "Who's in the new grave I stumbled over out there?"

Heneshaw said in a low voice, "My wife."

"Uh huh," said Walker. "Yeah. I was afraid of that." His mind seemed to be clearing rapidly. He looked at me inquiringly.

"The same discoloration," I told him; "no other sign."

"Do I get anything to eat?" Walker asked; and Loftus, his anger cooled, went out to the kitchen on the gallery. I heard him slamming canned goods around in the dark.

Walker got up, plodded to the water cooler, and drank four tumblers of water. Then he turned on us, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and rested a slow glance on each of us, one after another. His eyes wandered with weary speculation to the outer night.

"I've almost got you," he said slowly. "I believe—I believe I *have* got you."

"Who are you talking to?" I asked.

"The one I'm talking to knows who it is. It's one of two; one of two . . ."

In the silence the equatorial heat seemed to press more closely about us, choking the dimming lamp.

"Almost," said Walker, still eerily addressing that unnamed one among us, "almost I got my hands on you to-night. But that damn jungle takes the edge off a man. You won't get away, I guess. Yeah, to-morrow will do. You'll wait all right, you scaly——"

He slumped into a chair again, and Loftus brought him a heaping plate of beans, and a pint of bitter black coffee. He wolfed both.

"What else do you want?" Buck asked him gruffly.

"That's all, fellow. Sleep's what I want."

Yet he sat for a minute or two, staring out the door, across the gallery and into the night. As I looked at him I was thinking we had only this man's word that he had been to Tambos, and back again, in two days—a Herculean feat of machete work and marching endurance for any man, even one twenty times better jungle-hardened than Walker. Yet, studying him, I knew that what he said was so.

I thought again of the terrific lengths of self-punishment to which he had gone to get a bit of information that was easily evident, without effort, to a jungle-trained eye; but this time I had no desire to laugh. Instead a shiver ran across my shoulders; for, cost him what it might, this man had got that same information, in his own way, in the end. And I was thinking then that of all men I had ever known I would least like to have this one fix himself upon me, if I were the guilty man.

"Find your spark coil yet?" he asked me.

"No!"

"Didn't look in your fuselage, did you?"

"No."

"Didn't suppose you would, when I put it there."

"And what's this, may I ask?" said Loftus sarcastically.

Walker disregarded him. He turned his gaze on me speculatively, and all the insolence had gone out of it, and that peculiar opaque balefulness was missing, too. I think now that those things were in large part tricks he used to gain his ends. Instead, his eyes were now narrowed, and somehow very keen, red and thick-lidded as they were; and certainly there was no dementia discernible in them. In spite of his

weariness and a certain deep, smoldering ugliness of temper that had come into him, this man looked as coldly sane as a rock.

"An easy one to catch, you'd be," he told me slowly. "Easy and quick. Not so easy to get away from, though. I'll say this, before I forget it. If that damned jungle has throwed a fever into me, this business is going to be up to you, Macgregor. You're pretty near as dumb as you think, but not quite. Smash ahead with it."

"And I'll tell you something," Loftus declared. "Every confusion we've had around here since Blackburn died has been some hocus-pocus of yours, Walker. We know all about that idol's head, and the disappearing dart, too, and we've had enough of you in every way!"

"What are the sleeping arrangements?" Walker asked, ignoring him.

"To-morrow," Loftus went on, "we're going to leave here. You're going with us. I don't know what red tape is needed to put you on trial for murder in this country—and I don't care a whole lot. But I'll tell you this: one more funny move from you—just one more—and I'll rub you out like I would a scorpion!"

"Leaving, are we?" said Walker. "Suits me. How are we going to get in some sleep?" he asked me again.

"Last night," I said, "Harmon and Loftus sat up. I suppose Heneshaw and I will take our turn tonight."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Loftus. "One of you I don't trust, and the other is useless. Heneshaw don't count. I say we'll keep two of the other three of us up all the time—to watch Walker and each other."

"That's good," said Walker. "Just so there's two of you. Yeah, that's a lucky break. There ain't any two of you can get teamed up, that's dead certain!"

He got up, and went stumping wearily to the room he shared with Harmon.

"And no more sleep walking," Loftus warned him, "if you know what's good for the Master Mind!"

Walker turned back at the door. "You'll live to swallow that Master Mind stuff, Bucky my boy." I swear there was a gleam of humor in his eye, then, the first he had shown since his return.

He went into his room, where for a moment or two we heard him fumbling among his things in the dark. Then his bed creaked heavily under his weight, and

I think that in his exhaustion he must have slept instantly.

By this time it was eleven o'clock. The lamp that had been smashed on the rear gallery had cost us half our remaining kerosene, and what little there was in the single remaining lamp was burning very low. It seemed unlikely that there was enough of it to last the night.

There was talk of rigging some sort of lights to burn engine oil; but after all we had our flashlights. You don't so much feel the need of light, if you can send an instant ray through the dark at the touch of your thumb, and I, at least, had been careful to conserve my flashlight batteries. We were weary, impatient men, made perfunctory by our fatigue; and in the end we decided to save the remaining kerosene for a possible emergency, and mount our guard with our flashlights ready in the dark.

"You've had less sleep than any of us, Buck," said I. "Harmon and I will take the first two hours; then you and I."

"No," he decided, "if once I let go it'll be a long time before I'm broad awake again. Harmon and I will take the first two hours. We'll argue then who will be next to turn in."

I acceded to this. Harmon asked me to lend him my flash, his having burned out, and this also I conceded. Then, when Jane's key had clicked in her lock, I went to the front gallery, and took my old position in the chair by her window. In the living room, Buck blew out the light.

I sat awake for a long time, listening to the jungle, to the wakeful house, to the heart of the night itself. For the night is a Presence in that jungle, sentient and awake. In the brassy scorching glare of the sun, the jungle sleeps; but with darkness you can sense the slow vast breath of it, and the slow pulse of its life. You notice that most when you first come down, and sometimes you lie awake, with a queer sense that the whole night is awake and aware of you. Then you forget it for a year or two, your mind on your work and on the day when you will go home. Then, after a long time, you begin to sense it again, less hostile this time, but of a deeper reality; and that is the time to leave.

For long minutes at a time I would hear only the thousand small voices of the jungle—the distant squeal of a monkey, the incredibly deep baying of a croc far upriver, and innumerable small stirrings and writhings off somewhere in the tangle, half heard,

and less than half understood. Then Jane, by whose window I sat, would stir ever so slightly; and a deep emotion would touch me as I was reminded of her nearness, so that those faint sounds were infinitely precious to me, alone there in the dark.

I was still awake at a little after midnight when a low whistle sounded in the clearing itself; and though I did not raise myself I was instantly rigid with listening.

CHAPTER XIV

I INSTANTLY recognized the whistled phrase as one of the three or four principal whistle signals used by the natives of the Choco. They are small, brown, bow-legged men, those Chocos, a peaceful, even timorous race, who listlessly pursue a sort of stone-age mode of life, hidden in this age-old backwater of evolution. A harmless, friendly people, but very hard to change in their ways, as you find out when you want work done on that river.

The whistle I had heard means, in their usage: "One come out and talk." It may have been a signal for the parley of warriors, once. It is no more than a trading invitation, now.

For some time the whistle was repeated at intervals, soft and low, and easily mistakable for the cry of a bird; and I waited, intent upon learning who was going to answer it, if any one was, and to what end. My intention was to follow whoever left the house in answer to the whistle; but so long did it continue without result that I was about to conclude that

there was no hope of this. After all, it was probably only a Choco suitor, trying to call out some girl from the family of one of those servants who had gone.

I decided to answer the signal myself, or try to. The probability was that the whistler would flee at sight of me, but it seemed worth a try. Then, as I prepared to ease myself onto my feet, I suddenly froze again.

A figure passed between my eyes and the dim light of the stars outside. And, since the head of my cot was near the living-room door, that dark blocky form passed within three feet of me, swaying cat-footed and slow—and I heard no sound.

So, I thought, here was one, at least, who knew the silent spots in that creaky floor as well as I. Then, as I strained my eyes to fix the outline of that close, slow-moving figure, there came to my nostrils the heavy sweetish odor of rum. As the figure opened, inch by inch, that well-oiled screen, my eyes were able to confirm what my nose had told me. It was Harmon, all right.

Outside, the moon still delayed behind the jungle wall, but in the starlight I could follow Harmon's shape a little way as he walked slowly toward the

landing. Stealthily I got to my feet, preparatory to following him.

This, however, proved unnecessary. One note of the whistled phrase was now repeated, quite low, but very close, and I saw Harmon turn aside. Then I faintly heard his repressed voice, hardly more than a whisper, but audible to me in that still clearing, addressing the unseen—and Harmon spoke in a Choco tongue.

I have picked up a little smattering of the Choco dialects, with a view to keeping half-breed interpreters from robbing me beyond all reason; and I now understood Harmon to ask our night caller what it was he wanted. I cannot say which surprised me the more; the catlike movements of which that elephantine man had proved himself capable, or his use of a Choco language. Hidden abilities, both; though of what significance I could not yet judge.

The reply was audible, but unintelligible. Nor could my eyes get the outline of the whistler, though I could see Harmon well enough. The two now moved off a little way, in the direction of the landing; and I was able to see the native—if it was a native—as a shifting shadow in dimness, but no more. They paused just beyond reach of my straining ears, but I

could still see Harmon's shirt distinctly, and knew that I could not possibly approach them through the starlight that lay beyond the gallery's screen.

The two of them talked for what seemed to me a long time, and twice their voices rose so that I could detect the current of contention that was in them, and distinguish the odd chattery sound of the Choco vocabulary. But not one word could I make out.

Harmon came back at last, and I watched him as he hesitated just outside the screen. I could make out his gesture as he pulled for a moment or two at that pendulous lower lip. He made a pretense at silence as he entered, but it was a pretense, no more. This time he let the screen bump shut awkwardly, and went tiptoeing into the house, treading weightily on creaking and non-creaking boards alike. Then I heard him heave a wheezy sigh, and a chair creaked as he sat down.

Heneshaw's voice unexpectedly broke the silence.

"Doc, did you hear an Indian whistling out there a while ago?"

"Uh huh. I was out just now, and run him off while I was at it. Would you believe it, he was trying to beg a bar of chocolate!"

"Chocolate?"

"I guess so. That seemed about the only English he knew—'chocolate'—and he kept harping on it. I can't make anything out of their monkey talk."

"One of the pack boys had a daughter named Chacra," Heneshaw suggested, his voice faint and thin in the dark.

"Oh, shucks—of course," said Harmon.

Heneshaw now asked a question in the Choco tongue, so distinctly that even I understood. "Had you ever seen him before?" was what he asked. The words sound pretty chop suey, though, in that up-river jargon of the Choco.

"How's that?" said Harmon. "You'll have to speak English. I can't get this chica-chaca talk!"

Heneshaw murmured something unintelligible, and they fell silent.

Suddenly I got up, and went inside. "Let's have my flash a minute, Harmon."

"It's on the table, here."

I found it, and switched its bright circle of light around the room. Heneshaw was in bed under his mosquito net, Harmon sitting near the front door. Buck Loftus, somewhat glassy-eyed, but apparently broad awake, sat in a tilted chair against the wall opposite the open door of Walker's room.

"Yeah, I'm awake," he growled testily. "I saw Harmon go out, if that's what's worrying you; I had my gun on him. I wasn't going to let him turn your way."

I put the flashlight back on the table, and returned to the gallery.

"Can't a man——" began Harmon.

"Oh, shut up!" said Loftus.

This was reassuring in a way. I went back to the gallery, disturbed, but at the same time uncertain that I had learned anything, except that Loftus appeared to be making good his watch. If Harmon could move over those creaking floors like a cat, so now could I: for I had made it a point to find out just how that very thing could be accomplished. Then, I must have dozed.

I awoke listening, as was the habit I had fallen into here; and the first impression I had was that some small steady sound which had crept slowly into the night had suddenly ceased. An impression like that is not easy to describe, but if ever you experience it you will recognize it instantly, for it is as definite as missing the top step in the dark.

Almost at once I became aware of something else. From the far corner of the house was coming a curi-

ous half-audible sound of movement, a writhy, fumbly sort of sound, a good deal like the small disturbance a man makes while dressing in an upper berth. This was punctuated by the peculiar wooden creak, magnified by taut canvas, which can be nothing but the plaint of a wooden army cot. Then this sound too seemed suddenly to relax, and ceased.

No conscious thought nor logic was in what I did then, but only, I suppose, an old football habit of exploding into action on a guess—yet playing safe, just as niggardly safe as your wits are up to, all the time.

Into the house I went in long strides, my feet remembering those silent places in the floor. But as I exposed myself in the doorway I crouched low, instinctively remembering that if I stood erect, that upper-half screening of the gallery could show my silhouette to whoever waited within. Perhaps some part of my mind had been rehearsing these movements all night long. If I had one thought, as I plunged directly into action out of sleep, it was that the horror which waited among us in the house of mahogany was once more awake, and furtively moving.

When I had stepped out of line with the door I

stood erect again, and slid noiselessly along the right-hand wall, past Jane's door. At the door of the store-room I stopped; for from here I could get the best angle of vision into Walker's room, on the opposite side.

The moon, a little dimmer than the night Blackburn had died—it was on the wane—had risen by now, and in Walker's room it threw a pale dim square upon the decaying matting of the floor. Yet the rest of the room was in deep shadow. The line between darkness and that thin light was as sharp as if the moonlight had been a shaft of glass submerged in black water. Strain my eyes as I might, I could make out no object within.

I was about to cross the room to Walker's door; when suddenly my breath caught in my throat, and my scalp crawled, and my own eyes denied what they had seen.

Into that square of light a hand struck, rested lightly for an instant upon the floor, and was gone.

CHAPTER XV

The hand had been palm down, plantigrade, the hand of a man who crept swiftly and in silence, low to the matting. Only an instant glimpse—yet I was left with a permanent impression of fingers hooked and tense as the legs of a tarantula, and quick as a tarantula as they shrunk instantly out of the light. And the position of the hand indicated that its owner was entering with all swiftness the room where I stood.

After that one glimpse of the hand, all sign of the crawling horror was lost in darkness. I crouched forward, the fingertips of one hand upon the matting, waiting for a sound, the faintest whisper of a sound that would tell me where to direct my spring. That some discernible sound would be made by that swiftly creeping form I was utterly certain. I was quivering with nerves, every muscle ready. In an instant, I knew, I would be upon the murderer of Harry Blackburn.

The truth is that my throat was constricted with a terrible dread; but it was a primitive dread, a child's

dread of the unknown in the dark. Though my gun was still in its holster, it was by intention, for nobody knows who is going to be landed with a bullet when the guns begin to bang in the dark. And once I got hands on that body that was now in the room with me, hidden in the blackness, I had no doubt of what the outcome would be.

In the rear of the room sounded the small snap of a giving floor board, and I whirled. Almost I had been outflanked. I struck a hand out before me, for I knew that in this direction a chair blocked my way. In this instant of delay a dim golden eye of light came into being against the rear wall, then fell to the floor and died in a tinkle of glass. I heard Loftus curse, his voice breaking into an enraged whimper, like a bear. From the left side of the room sounded a faint movement, and once more I whirled. Were they all about me? Then there was a splintering wooden crash almost in front of my nose, and a gun smashed out from the rear of the room, once, twice, four times.

I swear that I felt the hot breath of the first bullet as it snarled in my ear like a brotherly rattlesnake. But not the second bullet, for I was plastered bolt upright against the wall, by then.

All these things happened at once. I suppose not a

quarter minute passed between the time I woke and the time I stood against that inner wall, listening to Loftus's smashing bombardment of the dark.

As the ringing of my ears died away after the last shot, there was a moment or two of silence; then again the low smoky cursing of Loftus, and the rip of match heads along the wall as he vainly tried to light one damp match after another. I watched curving green lines of phosphorus appear on the rear wall as match after match lost its futile head; and a sick anger was filling me as I realized that a chance was gone, perhaps forever.

I said bitterly, "If you're through shooting, I'll strike a light."

There was a moment's frozen silence, for in that dark room no one had known who anyone was, nor where. Then he said, "All right."

My own matches were in a waterproof case made of a shotgun shell, and I now struck one with the nail of my thumb. I hardly considered the very good possibility that I would take a bullet the instant my match flamed, so steamily had my anger gone to my head. And I barely glanced about me until I had moved to the table and lit the lamp.

As I crossed to the table with the match, Hene-

shaw's mosquito net billowed spasmodically, and he came surging out of it with a very bleary face, but wide glassy eyes. "What's happened? What's happened?" He was fully dressed; but for that matter so were we all.

Loftus stood at the rear wall, looking bigger than ever in the swell of the fury that was upon him. His face was red and congested, and his eyes shot sparks like a flint.

"Every—last—one of you," said Loftus, his voice slow and grinding. "A fine—scoop—of fish!"

I followed his eyes to where Harmon sat, stark upright in his chair, a posture unusual to him. My electric torch, unlighted, was in his hand. So rigid was his face, and so stonily were his eyes set on Loftus, that I had a queer idea for a minute that Buck's salvo had landed him, and that he was dead.

"Are you hit?" I asked him harshly.

Harmon relaxed into mobility. "Who? Me?" he exploded irascibly.

"In God's name, why didn't you snap that flash?"

"It won't light! You can see it won't!"

The cap was gone from the butt of the torch, and the battery had been removed. Both cap and battery

were in plain view on the table, however, and my first act was to reassemble the flashlight.

With my light working again I went immediately into Walker's room. The rubber buyer's mosquito net concealed his cot almost as completely as if the net had been the walls of a mausoleum, checking the light of my torch. It was curious how completely that cheap, densely woven bar we were using could conceal what was behind, if there was the least uncertainty about the light. I was reluctant to lift that net, for I already knew what I was going to find.

"A couple of you better come in here," I suggested; and first Heneshaw, then Loftus, came in and stood beside me as I tossed the net back.

Flatfoot Walker was dead. The same discoloration of skin was present as had characterized the deaths of Harry Blackburn and Lucretia. Walker lay on his back, his limbs twisted awkwardly, not at all in the position of a sleeping man. It was as if the numbing limbs had made a futile, half-responsive struggle against the inevitable. It was apparent, even to a layman, that he had died but a few moments before.

"The same disease," said Heneshaw in a hushed voice. "In God's name, what has come upon us here?

It cuts a man down like the stroke of a great whip. . . ."

"Disease, hell!" I snarled at him, the savage anger still shaking me. "Hold the light, Loftus."

Something had struck me as peculiar about Walker's jaw, his throat. I forced myself to investigate this; and after a moment or two I was convinced that something extraneous was wedged into the throat, some hard, roughly spherical object. It was no easy job, nor a pleasant one, to get the thing out of there; but it had to be done, and presently I succeeded in extracting it.

It was the head of the Indian doll.

CHAPTER XVI

I STOOD staring down at the thing, and all the anger went out of me, giving place to a ghastly dread. For the first time I possessed an irrefutable bit of evidence, produced in the full light, and in the presence of witnesses. This was no half-believed report from another person, no half-seen imagining in the dark, but an evidence that might be incredible, but was nevertheless concrete, and real.

That weird doll's head stared back at me, with its carved wooden face, as I held it in my palm. The carved face was crude and ugly, typical of the carving of the Chocos. It had a straight, flat-profiled nose, eyes that were small holes, and a slit for a mouth; and I swear that that miniature wooden face stared back at me with an expression unreadable and concealing, like the face of the jungle itself.

I shivered, and looked slowly from Loftus to Heneshaw, and then to Jane, who had come to the doorway, evidently, while I worked. Heneshaw's face

was gaunt with horror; Buck's eyes were narrowed; and the muscles of his face looked thickened and ugly; Jane was white-faced.

"Dead?" Jane breathed.

I nodded. "Come in here, Harmon!"

The fat driller came reluctantly. There was a quaver in his voice as he said, "This is too much. It's too much. . . ."

"If we had a pulmotor," Loftus began.

The possibility of trying to induce artificial respiration occurred to me; but that darkening of the skin, to the very fingernails, and the limited nature of the struggle Walker seemed to have made, told me that some deadly element other than strangulation made the attempt useless. Jane gently lowered the mosquito netting over the figure on the cot.

"A couple of you," said Loftus bitterly, "have a lot to explain about to-night."

"Beginning with yourself," I suggested.

"I know," he said, very humbly for him. "This is all my fault, Macgregor."

We followed him into the living room. I tossed the doll's head onto the shelf, and went into Buck's room to wash my hands. When I returned the four of them were sitting in silence, waiting for me. Buck was

lowering and grim, Jane white and silent, the other two badly shaken. It suddenly struck me how few we had become.

"Three days ago," I said, "there were eight of us here; now there are five. Besides that, Dan Corliss walked off into the Tambos trail, and there disappeared."

"This thing's gone beyond a joke," Loftus mumbled, and I looked at him sharply. He seemed so engrossed in thought that I think he was hardly aware of what he said.

"And your alibi," I said to Loftus, "is that you were asleep, I suppose!"

"No! Not for a minute! Do you think I——"

"And yet——"

"I bit my tongue half through, staying awake. And, by God, I did stay awake. But—my sense kept blurring out on me. Otherwise, I know that there must have been something that I could have heard, or seen. That's why I blame myself. But, by all that's holy, I did the best I could!"

I turned on Harmon. "And why did you take that flashlight apart?"

"I didn't. I did no such fool thing! It was on the table here, as you know very well, and when I——"

"When you woke up," Loftus snarled at him. "This fat fool has made no pretense of staying awake, from the first. Except for that one prowl of his into the clearing, he's slept steadily all night!"

Harmon put in no denial.

"And you," I said to Loftus, "you knew he was asleep, yet didn't wake him, nor call me?"

"The only conceivable use he was, was to keep an eye on me," said Loftus. "Why should I worry about whether he made a good job of it or not?"

"What were you shooting at to-night?" I demanded.

He looked at us, a quick hard glance to each. "This may or may not sound peculiar to three of you," he said. "The other one knows."

This was so nearly what Walker himself had said, upon his return from the jungle, that it was as if some part of the living Walker remained with us, and was guiding Buck's words. In that room the pungent odor of powder smoke still mingled with the heavy reek of Harmon's rum, and the oppressive heat was undiminished. But some impalpable current of something that was cold seemed moving through that thick hot air, so that I shivered again.

"I was groggy," he went on. "I've admitted that

already. Walker was kind of snoring heavily, and I went and looked at him once, but he seemed all right. Then, a long time after that, I thought I heard a kind of struggle going on in there. It stopped the same second I was sure I heard it, and it was hardly more than as if he turned over in bed any, so I waited a minute more. Then I got up to look, carrying this gun here, and my flash. Just then I thought I heard a movement by the front door, but I didn't investigate it, for I was watching Walker's room.

"See that patch of moonlight on Walker's floor? Well—it's shifted just a little bit, now. That was all I could see in there. Then suddenly I saw a man's hand there, plain."

He glowered at us, as if we were doubting him.

"I should think," I said, "that as long as you were going to shoot up the house, that would have been a good time for it."

"How'd I know what I was seeing?" Loftus retorted angrily. "Somebody might have rolled out of bed. Should I shoot him for picking himself up? What I did was drop to the floor, to see if I could catch the fellow's outline against the window. I was just in time to catch a glimpse of something rushing into this room."

"On hands and knees?"

"Hands and feet, I should say; knees would have made a noise. But the silhouette was very low, so I guess the legs must have been nearly straight out behind. A kind of ankle crawl, I guess."

"And you still did not fire," I commented.

"My automatic was flat to the floor—I was chest down, resting on my hands. Before I could get it up, this thing was lost in the darkness, in here."

"Quick moving!"

"Damned quick. Well, I jumped up, and snapped my flash. The blasted thing failed me—no better than a firefly. I dropped it and grabbed up a chair, and slung it down the room, hoping to land on something I could shoot at by sound; but it missed. After that I got mad and took a shot or two in the dark."

"Four, to be exact. Why you didn't kill Harmon——"

"Or you," said Buck, in a voice like ice. "What were you doing in here, my friend?"

I told them what I was doing there.

"A hell of a likely story," said Buck nastily.

"And very similar to your own."

"But couldn't either one of you recognize that hand?" Jane asked.

Both Loftus and I were sure we could not.

"And now, my fat driller," said Loftus, "I want to know exactly why you went on the prowl, just after midnight."

Harmon's story was quickly told. It would have sounded glib, in fact, but for his shakiness, and the evident earnestness of his desire to be believed. It was a story I was able to verify in part: how he had heard the Indian whistling, and gone out to see what the fellow was prowling around for; how he had driven him off, then sat down in the living room again. Here, he admitted, he had fallen asleep.

A silence followed this recounting, and through it I noticed the wheeze of Harmon's slightly asthmatic breathing. Evidently I was not the only one who noticed, for Loftus said abruptly, "If you'd been asleep in that chair all the time, I would have heard you breathe. I can hear you a mile, on a still night."

"The fact is," said Harmon, "I waked up a little while ago and I was listening—practically holding my breath at it."

"And what did you hear?"

"Gunshots," said Harmon.

Loftus shot to his feet and crossed the room to Harmon in two strides. I thought Loftus was going

to seize the driller by the throat, such a fury had flashed into Buck's face. But Harmon, with a movement of astonishing agility, was out of his chair and behind it before the other got to him. Buck checked himself, and stood glaring at the man across the interposed chair.

"You—fat—liar," said Buck savagely, "you fool with me, will you, you fool with me——"

For an instant the look of shaken, flustered stupidity went out of Doc Harmon's face, like the dropping of a mask; and he returned Buck's glare with such a concentration of livid hate that I half rose, unsure of what was about to happen here.

"Joe—Buck!" Jane cried. "Oh, please!"

Buck half raised his hands, and I was certain that he was going across that chair at Harmon. But at the last moment Harmon dropped his eyes, and Jane spoke Buck's name again, and this time Loftus obeyed. He prowled back to his own chair, moving like a sulky lion.

"I know this is true," said Heneshaw. "Harmon went out of the house and came back again, and sat down in that chair, just as he said." His voice was low and indifferent; and there was no interest in life—and little life itself—in his gray face. He looked as if

affairs had long since passed the point where they were of any meaning to him.

"That's right," said Harmon. "See, he'll tell you I'm not lying. Why, come to think of it, we exchanged a few words, about that Indian out there. He had heard the whistle, and I told him about sending the Indian off."

"And why," I shot at him, "did you lie to Heneshaw about understanding the Choco tongue?"

He hesitated briefly before he mumbled, "I don't know what you mean."

CHAPTER XVII

AGAIN there was a silence while Harmon met nobody's eyes.

"You talked to that Indian in his own language, which you speak better than I do myself," I said; "then told Heneshaw that you could not understand that stuff."

"I can't seem to recall that," said Harmon. He was recovering composure, now, however, as some men can best do under fire, and anybody could see he was about to slip through my fingers

Buckner Loftus put in, "You, Macgregor—you understood what Harmon and the Indian were saying?"

"I heard Harmon address someone out there in Choco, asking what he wanted there. Then they moved off, and I could make nothing out of their words."

"I didn't mean," said Harmon, "to give Phil the impression that I didn't know any Choco. I do recall now that Phil asked me something, in some river

dialect, that I didn't catch. It's true that I spoke to the Indian in Choco, of a sort. Everyone picks up a little smattering of the gibberish, I suppose."

"You spoke to him in his own tongue," I pressed him; "yet you came in here pretending that you thought an Indian had come around at that time of night to beg chocolate!"

"That was supposed to be a joke, damn it," Harmon mumbled. "Naturally, I'm not as big a chump as that. But it's perfectly true I didn't know what he was talking about until Phil helped me out. How was I to know there used to be a native girl around here named Chacra?"

Here Heneshaw tossed Harmon just the flicker of a curious glance; and instantly I knew that Heneshaw had caught Harmon in a lie. The meaning of that glance was so obvious, however, that I saw no need of probing the matter at once. Harmon was of the type which notices native girls; and Heneshaw evidently knew that Harmon had noticed the one named Chacra.

"It seems to me very possible," said Heneshaw, "that this Choco man who was prowling about could explain everything that has been happening here. Everything."

Buckner Loftus saw fit to back up this idiocy. "It does seem," said he, "that it's up to you to turn in a good deal better account of this fellow, Harmon."

There was such complete and obvious futility in this trend that I went out and washed my hands again, for want of a better outlet for my exasperation. Not that there wasn't plenty about the night visitor that needed explaining. I knew enough about the Choco race to know that no jungle runner was going to rout a white man out of bed, except by mistake; and that having made such a mistake, and perceived it, any native would have promptly dissolved into the dark, which is just about the one thing the Chocos do really well.

That native—if it had been a native, which I was inclined to believe—had deliberately whistled out a white man, evidently by prearrangement or custom. I wanted to know whether the Chocoman's whistle had been answered by the one he expected, and just what his business had been. But for all I knew the whistler might have been not a man but a woman; perhaps this same girl Chacra, whom Heneshaw appeared to think might already have received more notice from Harmon than was good for her.

They weren't going to find the answers to these

questions by wrangling away at Harmon, I knew that much. As I plunged my face in lukewarm water I could hear Harmon's voice expanding into enlargements upon nothing.

"The fact is, I didn't get a good look at this fellow; he seemed to be inquiring about . . ." On and on.

"This prowler," Heneshaw was saying when I returned to the room, "could easily have got into Walker's room by way of—— Were either of his screens unhooked, did anyone notice?"

"One of them was unhooked," I told him shortly.

"There!" said Heneshaw, reviving slightly. "He could have got in and strangled poor Walker, then——"

"Then rushed through here on his hands and knees, to make the murder more confusing," I suggested. "This is utter nonsense."

"I can't see," said Heneshaw without heat, "why any theory should be called 'nonsense,' little as we know. We don't even know just how these people have died."

"You don't?" said I.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Do you?" Heneshaw countered. "Do you know, really, exactly what has caused these deaths?"

"I'd say strangulation," said Harmon. "That seems plain enough."

"And just how was Lucretia strangled?" I queried.

Heneshaw seemed to shrink into himself a bit further at the mention of his wife's name. This may have been imagination, however, for he said quietly, "What's your theory?"

"All three were poisoned," I said shortly.

"By person or persons unknown," Loftus filled in.

"And the head of the doll?"

"The murderer is up against a peculiar problem," said I. "His poison cannot be allowed to take instant effect, as strychnine would, for example; for that would reveal how the poison was given. I am inclined to think, too, that he is administering it in some way that does not leave him exact control of how much is

taken by the victim. For his purposes, therefore, his poisonings are only partly successful."

"My God," grumbled Loftus, "what would it be around here if they were a success?"

"The poison has a delayed effect," I continued; "and when it does take hold it runs its course in anywhere from two minutes, as in Lucretia's case, up to an hour, in Harry Blackburn's. You remember, I suppose, that in Harry's case Jane thought she heard muttered words. We therefore know that if the poison is under-dosed, which the poisoner cannot seem to guard against, the victim is still capable of an attempt at speech, *after* he becomes aware that he is stricken."

I hesitated, glancing at Jane, whose presence made me reluctant to probe a course of events horrible to any sensitive mind. I was accusing of murder one of the three men in the room; and the ugliness of the situation was not decreased by the fact that not even I knew which of the three I meant.

"In Harry Blackburn's case," I went on, "I think that the partial failure of the poison caught the murderer by surprise. He lay awake, here in this house, listening to Blackburn's struggle for breath. This was easily heard, as we know from Jane. He

heard Blackburn trying to cry out, to speak; and he was afraid someone would go out to Blackburn, and learn something from him before he died.

"Therefore, he got up and went out—I don't know by what exit, though probably it was the rear door. But I know that as he went he was thinking of a means of stopping forever Blackburn's speech, preferably a means that would not be found out. He therefore took the head of that Indian doll; and used it to put an end to the sounds that Jane had heard."

"What about the dart?"

"The murderer had not originally intended to use this; but when he decided to visit his victim, he took the dart, and added it as an afterthought, because it provided an easy and obvious explanation of the death. I don't think he had planned his other murders at that time, or he would have preferred not to distinguish any one of them, but to leave them all looking like the effects of some unknown disease."

"And the marks on the tree?"

"I'm only guessing, now," I admitted. "This poison, whatever it is, seems to stiffen its victim. Certainly nobody could have jammed anything down the throat of either Blackburn or Walker without a

terrific struggle, if they had not been either paralyzed or greatly weakened.

"But we know that Harry proved much harder to kill than the murderer expected—at least that is my theory. When the murderer had slit Harry's net, and laid hold of him, Blackburn seems to have made a last desperate effort—probably in the nature of a bolt. The murderer clung to him, fearing he would be heard crashing blindly into the bamboo, drawing attention before the murderer could get back to his bed. In trying to check Blackburn's rush he used a free hand to grab for the tree, and left the marks you have seen there."

"Very neat," said Loftus dryly. "Well, if that's what you're going to assume, that lets me out. I wouldn't have needed to grab any tree; I would have picked him up bodily, with one hand."

"Not if you were caught off balance," I told him. He let it pass, and I went on. "The murderer returned to the house. Whatever window or door he had gone out of, he came back through the window of my room, where he was seen by me."

"And why that one?" Heneshaw asked.

"Think where everyone was at that time, by their own statements. Jane was sleeping very restlessly, or

not at all. Her tossing about warned the murderer, in this old sounding board of a house, that he dared not try the front gallery entrance, which she could see from her bed. Harmon says he was standing in his window—the one that opens on the rear gallery—and that he lit a cigarette there. That cut off the rear entrance, and the outside window of that room. Only Lucretia's room and my room remained; and Lucretia is—was—known to be very nervous, which makes for light sleeping. The murderer undoubtedly knew the house, down to the last creaky board. He took the only window that was left."

"Now you're talking sense," said Harmon.

"Lucretia Heneshaw—the poison worked more effectively in her case. And in the case of Walker, the details were almost exactly the same as in Blackburn's case. I don't know how the murderer knew that Walker had discovered the head of the doll in Blackburn's throat; but I assume he saw that it was missing at the autopsy the next morning. Or Walker may have told him, as he told me. If a man had it in mind, he would have seen that lump in Walker's throat, plain enough. Walker struggled less than Blackburn—that was perhaps the only difference between the two crimes."

"Very neat," said Loftus again, without applause. "I see you have everything down pat. Except the murderer. You seem to have failed to locate the murderer."

"The murderer himself," I said, "has narrowed the field very considerably."

"Down to four, in fact," said Heneshaw.

"Down to three," said Harmon.

"Down to two," said I deliberately.

"And just what do you mean by that?" Loftus growled.

"It's plain enough what he means," said Harmon. "Naturally the man doesn't include himself, you blockhead. And you all heard him alibi me, didn't you?"

"I can't recall it," I said.

Harmon leaned forward with a patient explanatory air. "Look: you plainly said that the murderer was driven to return through your room because he saw me at the window, lighting my cigarette."

"According to your own statement," I reminded him.

"Verified by Walker—don't you remember?" Harmon insisted.

"That's true," Heneshaw said. "I remember that."

"Accepting Walker's statement as true: we don't know," I pointed out, "whether he saw Harmon strike a match at the window before, or after, the murderer had got back into the house."

"But why on earth would I——" began Harmon.

"You want me to reconstruct?" I asked. "You attempted a reëntry by your own window, heard Walker move, as if he was awake, and entered by my window. You heard me move, and suspected I had seen you. Therefore upon regaining your room you stamped about, in a way that would wake Walker, if he was not already awake—'stamped about' is his own expression. You struck a match to fix his attention as you peered out the window, and raised and lowered the screen clumsily. Thus you made it look as if you, not Walker, had made the rear entrance impossible to the murderer; and fixed it so that your statement would fit mine, and his yours—just all friendly investigators together."

"And that," said Harmon, fixing me with a glassy eye as his whole body seemed to inflate slowly, "is an absolute and complete lie." If I had hoped that he would break into a self-condemning anxiety of denials, my hope failed me.

"Yes," said I, "I'm inclined to agree with you."

That took the wind out of him. "Then, that is *not* your theory?" he almost whimpered.

"I don't know."

"You said, I think," said Buck, his voice steely, "that we suspects were narrowed down to two."

"I submit the scratches on the tree as the essential clue," I said. "Blackburn's nails would have been broken; so would Heneshaw's, though we know he was in bed. You may look at mine, if you want to."

"Or mine," said Harmon quickly, extending his hands.

"Horny hands of toil," sneered Loftus. It was true Harmon had gnarled, powerful hands, with nails like cow horn. "You couldn't bust those nails of yours with an axe!"

"Nor the bark of a tree," I agreed; and Harmon drew back slowly. "As for you, Loftus—you admit your nails were broken."

For a moment he did not reply.

"But Macgregor," said Heneshaw, "the figure you saw that night went *through* your room. Wouldn't Buckner have gone directly to his bed?"

"You have had an objection to every theory," I said to Heneshaw dryly. "May I ask if you are trying to clear everyone but yourself?"

He permitted himself the faintest of sorrowful smiles. "I would as soon suspect myself," he said, "as anyone here. I've known Buck for——"

"He has a point, there, just the same, Macgregor," said Loftus. The man seemed somewhat tamed, for the moment. "If it had been me, why wouldn't I have been glad to duck under my net? Do you think I'd be worrying about a drink of water at a time like that?"

"I give you credit for being acute enough to foresee that very point," I answered.

There was a silence, and I lit a cigarette; and nobody was more surprised than I to see that my hand was as steady as a steel fixture.

What surprised me more was that I had not drawn Loftus into one of his roaring furies. Instead the man seemed puzzled; and I saw that he was thinking of something else, some point unspoken. When his eyes turned to me, however, they were sardonic.

"I'll say one thing," he boomed at me, more patronizingly than tauntingly, I thought; "Flatfoot picked himself a suitable successor."

"Successor as what?" murmured Harmon, glancing toward Walker's room.

Once more I felt that something had eluded me, slipped through my fingers. I had entered upon my speculative discourse deliberately, hoping to achieve a quick smoke-out. This had failed, and I was reduced to fruitless efforts to weigh the intonation of a voice, the tell-tale inflection of a word. I checked this waste mental motion by an effort of will. Another fact was what I needed; one last fact that would be the key to everything else.

In the few remaining moments that the five of us sat there—five that remained of eight in that increasingly sinister house of mahogany—I was studying those two men: the gross, stealthy-minded gringo driller, and the overbearing young bull of a man who was accustomed to break obstacles out of his way with his hands. And suddenly, for no reason that I could name, my mind jumped to Dan Corliss, the unaccounted-for man who his daughter was sure was alive—somewhere.

Curiously I was wondering if that "somewhere" was perhaps very close at hand.

That the showdown which I had forced had failed in its purpose did not surprise me. But Walker's death brought with it an increased sense of an ines-

capable closing-in of unknown forces, hideous and indomitable; and Jane's presence in the narrowing trap made the situation intolerable.

"We may as well pack our grub," I suggested. "We have some shovel work to do, for that matter. If we get that out of the way there'll be no reason for staying here any longer. I want to see the launch shove off in the first daylight."

No one made objection to this, and for a time all five of us worked together, packing up what supplies would be needed for the long drift and march to Laguna. If I found my spark coil where Walker had said he put it, and I found nothing else wrong with my engine, I intended to fly Jane straight to Panama; but I said nothing of this, considering it unwise to start a new dispute before it was necessary. For the present I let them think that I had no other intention than that of accompanying the drifting launch.

When our supplies were ready for loading we took the digging tools, and went out to make a grave for Charley Walker beside those of Blackburn and Lucretia Heneshaw. For a time Jane held the lamp for us while we worked. Then the last of the kerosene burned out, and we continued by the light of the waning moon. We labored slowly, having no need for

haste, nor any desire to get back to the now completely darkened house.

I kept an eye on Jane, who stayed close by us; but I did not notice when Harmon left us, nor that he had gone, until the first gray light of dawn made it apparent that the five of us had become four.

"Where's Doc Harmon?"

"Why, he was sitting down over here when—— Hey, Doc! Where are you?"

"Who saw him last?"

Questions brought to light only vague impressions. No one was certain that Harmon had been present for the last hour and a half. Heneshaw thought that he had walked off to the house an hour or so before, but believed that he had returned. Further probing revealed that Heneshaw was very uncertain about this.

"Harmon! Hey, Doc!" Loftus roared again, his voice fit to rock the jungle.

There was no answer.

CHAPTER XIX

Loftus went striding toward the house, the overbearing swagger still in his shoulders. Then he hesitated and turned off, apparently meaning to make a patrol of the clearing's edge. Leaving him to that, I went directly down to the landing, where the Far Rivers launch had been moored, concealed from the house by the cypress.

As I had anticipated, the launch was gone.

Loftus joined me in response to my hail, and contributed a few selected oaths.

"You must have known instantly," I accused him, "that Harmon had pushed off in the launch. What was your reason for pretending that this didn't occur to you?"

He stood looking at me sidelong, his eyes very ugly, but thoughtful too; and it was plain that for some reason he did not wish to quarrel with me, now. As for me, I was spoiling for a good fight, after all that tension, and with this man particularly. But I was willing to postpone it, if he was.

"I see the pirogues are gone also," I said more reasonably. "Naturally, if he didn't want to be followed, he would see to that."

"There's one pirogue that isn't gone," said Loftus slowly, estimating me; and I waited, thinking he referred to the one that I had hidden. "Look here, Macgregor. I know you hate my guts, and I'm glad of it, because I've got no use for you either. But it seems to me we'll do better if we work together for a little while, here."

"What do you want of me?"

"I've got a pirogue hidden; I planted it for just such an emergency as this. I think you and I ought to take that dugout and go after Harmon."

"We've got to have that launch, certainly," I agreed.

"And Harmon too," Loftus growled. "I'm interested in finding out what happened to Dan Corliss, for Jane's sake. And I'm not anywhere near satisfied about how much Harmon knows in this deal. If he's killed old Corliss, I'm going to have it out of him, if I have to wring him like sponge!"

For all I knew, I was talking to the man who had himself killed Dan Corliss—if Corliss was dead—and perhaps four others as well. I could not read him. I

was confident of one thing, though—that Loftus was almost as much interested in Jane's welfare as was I; and that I could trust him to whatever extent he was controlled by this factor, and not one inch beyond. I very much doubted that Harmon knew anything about Dan Corliss. The little gun that had been placed on Jane's window sill the night after Corliss's disappearance gave me a different view of the matter; and also an advantage over Buck, for he knew nothing of this clue—unless, it suddenly occurred to me, he had put the gun there himself, for reasons extremely obscure.

I was about to refuse to follow Harmon with him, when I realized that this might be just what Loftus wanted.

"I'll go with you," I told him. "We don't know just how long he's been drifting downsteam, but it can't have been for more than an hour or two. We can overtake him in half the time, unless he's managed to start the engine."

"Small danger of that!"

Buck produced his pirogue from among the shore tangles, and I surprised him by raising my own from where I had sunk it in the dark water beside the landing. I beached the crude canoe upon the mud by the

landing. Then, as I rolled the last of the water out of it, something tumbled out onto the mud: a small salt bag, apparently containing several objects. I rescued it as it slid into the river, for it had not been in the canoe before.

By this time the quick tropic dawn was brightening very fast. Jane Corliss and Phil Heneshaw joined us, and all three stood over me as I ripped the bag open with my knife and shook out three or four great rusty spikes, such as anyone could have worked out of the rotten piling with his fingers. Then there rolled out onto the boards of the landing that same inane, incongruously sinister bit of wood—the head of the Indian doll.

It jerked an oath out of Loftus. "Is there no getting away from that thing?" he rumbled.

"Why," I asked him, "are *you* so anxious to get away from it?"

His neck thickened, reddening. "The fool thing is always turning up," he growled, "and always in the middle of trouble. It was chucked in the river to destroy evidence, I suppose, though I don't see why that should have been necessary, especially."

In all justice, I had to concede that the thing's unexpected reappearance had given me a start, too. I

now split the thing in two with my knife, just to make certain that it was only the solid bit of wood it was supposed to be, and of course found that it was. I gave Loftus one half, by way of a gesture, and stuck the other half in my pocket.

We now bound the two pirogues together by means of poles across the gunwales, in the manner of a catamaran, to overcome their uncanny tipsiness. At the last moment Loftus hesitated, then unbuckled his gun belt and gave it to Jane.

"Put that on," he ordered her. "Can you use it?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't be afraid to, on the least excuse. And you, Heneshaw—you're to take care of her, you hear? Don't either one of you stir from this landing. And if anything happens to this girl while I'm gone, Heneshaw, I'll have your heart out with my hands, hear me?"

This sounded like bombastic nonsense. Of the two men I suspected, one had fled down river, and the other was going with me unarmed. After all, it was the human element that was to be feared in that clearing—not the jungle, nor the grief-stricken old man who had lost most heavily of all. We got into the double dugout, and Loftus shoved off with an

angry thrust that sent us fathoms into the stream.

Not more than a thousand yards downstream from the house of mahogany we rounded a blind bend to come suddenly upon the runaway launch, grounded on a mud bar in midstream.

"Hold her!" Loftus growled. We leaned on our poles, bracing our craft against the sluggish current, and waited to see what we were up against here.

Aboard the launch nothing moved. She lay perfectly motionless in the slowly moving water; and from the distance of a hundred yards she looked strangely ghostly in the shadowed light of early morning. At her stern the missing pirogues were tied, and a count showed at once that they were all there. We could make out no sign of Harmon. I loosened my automatic in its holster.

We let ourselves drift slowly down upon the grounded launch. I, at least, did not know what sort of trouble I was looking for. Perhaps more than anything else I was expecting to find, as I at last stepped over her side, the body of Doc Harmon.

I was wrong. A priming can of gasoline, and the position of the crank, told us that some effort had been made to start the engine; but a close search of the boat produced no other sign of anything having

happened here. The painter was coiled, forward, to show that the launch had not broken adrift of her own accord; but that was all.

Presently we took our double pirogue and made an exploration of both shores, to see if Harmon had waded out of the river; and concluded to our complete satisfaction that he had not. His disappearance was odd, in this part of the river, where the Choco pirogues hardly ever came.

After that we made one more brief but entirely futile effort to start the engine.

"It's the breaker points," Loftus roared, hurling the crank into the scuppers. "We'll never get the juice through to her in a thousand years!"

"Well, I know it," I admitted.

"We'll dismantle your OX-5, that's what we'll do; we ought to be able to piece one engine out of the two of them, and then——"

"Just a minute," said I. "If my ship has been put out of commission again, as I suppose it has, I'm willing to dismantle her. But if by any chance she'll fly, you're not going to touch her, for breaker points or anything else, because I'm going to take her into the air, no later than at once!"

"I was looking for that," Loftus said, when he had

eyed me for a moment or two. "So; you mean to hop, do you?"

"If my plane hadn't been tampered with I'd have had Jane Corliss out of here long ago. And now, if I can get into the air, I mean to waste no time about it."

"No?"

"After that I'll guarantee to fly the rest of you out of here, one at a time—probably to Laguna. You'll be able to get out to Cartagena from there, all right. Or, I can fly you back to Cartagena, for that matter."

Loftus began to hum a tune I had long forgotten. Then, a shiver ran across my shoulders as he sang a phrase or two of the words, gazing at the water: "Who's going to bury the last man dead? I mean—the last man to leave this place. . . ."

Then he laughed in a short, ugly way. "You can hop if you want to; but Jane's not going with you, my tall friend, no, not at all!"

"And why isn't she?" I demanded furiously.

"Because I don't trust you, not an inch farther than I can hurl this boat, that's why," he told me, looking me sidelong in the eye. "You asked for it, and you got it, and how do you like it?"

"Mark me this," I snarled at him: "if my ship will rise I'm taking Jane out of here to-day! If you want fight it's yours, laddie, any old place and any old time—you hear?"

"You want her out of here, do you?" he asked; and went on, when I did not trouble to answer: "I'll give you a way you can get her out. I can fly that rotten crate of yours better than you can, whether you know it or not. If you're anxious enough to get her out of this place I'll fly her to Laguna, or Cartagena, or hell's end if she says the word. Then I'll bring you back your crate, and I won't be asking you to fly me any place either!"

I laughed in his face, and he reddened. "The other way," said he, with the gleam of an ugly grin, "is to dismantle the OX-5, so that we can all leave the place together."

I considered this. Eager as I was to bring my differences with Buck Loftus into direct action, I disliked to risk putting myself out of commission until Jane was in a safe place.

He seemed to read my mind. "Oh, there's two or three things I mean to have an accounting for from you, buddy," he said, his voice full of menace.

"First I mean to see Jane safe out of here; and after that——"

"If it was certain we could fix the launch by looting the plane, I'd agree to it. But it's not certain. I've got no notion of spending the day in tinkering, and then find that Jane—and we all—have another lightless night in this morgue."

"Well, at worst," he declared contentiously, "we can do as we planned—slip cable, and drift down to the coast."

"That's a peach of a walk you've got cut out for her, that way," I snapped at him, beginning to lose my temper.

"Well, it would anyway get her out from under this danger, here," he suggested.

"And how do I know that?"

"Now you listen a minute," said he, angering. "Get this through your thick head: maybe I killed Blackburn and Walker. As it happens, I didn't; but suppose I did? This ought to be plain to anybody: the one I'm interested in here is Jane Corliss, and I'll go as far to keep her out of harm as the next one, and a damned sight farther than you, for all your stand-in!"

"You're beside the point," said I. "You go no place with Jane while I stand in my shoes!"

"Nor you," he said heartily. "Now I've got one idea more. It's just a chance for you to make yourself useful, with your rotten flying coffin, so I suppose naturally you won't hear of it. But this is it: fly to Laguna; it's an easy two-hour hop, and you can be back at noon. Leave word that they've got to meet us with their launch, when it gets back from Cartagena, or pick us up off the coast. Maybe you can get breaker points from them. Anyway, we'll wait for you until noon. We'll all leave together, drifting down river in this launch, and we'll fix it if we can, or anyway we'll get picked up pretty quick. Now take it or leave it."

"I'll reverse that proposition," I said. "If you want to fly to Laguna, alone, on that same errand, I'll lend you my ship."

He snorted and turned away to pull a pole out of one of the pirogues. "That girl," said he, with heavy emphasis, "is just as far out of my sight as she's going to get, right now."

He jammed his pole deep into the river bed, and I, securing another, did likewise. Together we heaved in an effort to get the nose of the launch off the sucking

mud in which she was imbedded. We could not move her.

Loftus broke his pole. While he got himself another I went to the stern and cut adrift all, except our own catamaranned pair, of the water-logged dugouts, for they made a heavy hamper in the current. Then as I picked up my pole again I heard Loftus whimper a curse, in that curious way of his when his temper broke, like an angry bear; and I turned to see him heave terrifically, while his tough ironwood pole bent like a bow. The whole launch shuddered, and rolled stodgily; then slowly slid into deep water again. I helped him turn her nose to the current as she ponderously wheeled.

That man was strong! A thrill of admiration went through me, little as I liked him. We seemed to be getting very close now to the inevitable clash between Loftus and myself. I could smell battle in the air, and I was pleased.

I threw all my strength onto my own pole—but it did not bend—as I helped him work the launch over into the more sluggish water close to the cypress roots.

CHAPTER XX

It was Jane Corliss who persuaded me to fly to Laguna.

When we had returned from the recovered launch, and had told the two others of Harmon's disappearance from the face of the river, I located my spark coil and replaced it. Loftus swung the prop for me, for we both recognized that there was sense in knowing what we were fighting over, before we came to grips.

No one was more surprised than I when the OX-5 caught hold and bellowed at the jungle in a voice in no way changed from the last time I had warmed her up. After that I went over the whole ship carefully, looking for filed wires, but found nothing.

The very fact that my ship had not been tampered with any further threw a new mystery about the disappearance of Harmon. It was natural enough that a guilty man should flee, leaving us all stranded until he could lose himself forever in some port of missing men. But why should he flee, knowing that he could

swiftly be overtaken by air, even if he succeeded in starting the engine of the launch? That he should have overlooked the possibility of being overtaken, either by air or water, was incredible. For the time, the meaning of the whole affair eluded me completely.

Just then, however, I was more interested in my immediate problem of getting Jane Corliss safely to Panama.

Unfortunately I was unable to talk to Jane alone. Buck Loftus saw to that. Heneshaw stuck close also, so that we were all in on that embittered discussion—all four of us that were left.

"Jane," I opened abruptly, ignoring Loftus, "my plane is working. I can take one passenger. I guess you know I'm going to take you. Loftus and Heneshaw can follow in the launch, and I'll come back for them when I've put you down in a safe and comfortable place."

I know that she would have acceded if Loftus had not broken in.

"And I say," he told her, "that that won't do. I know you trust Macgregor, but I don't. I've already told him I don't mean to let you out of my sight until I've got you clear of this place, and of everybody in or connected with this place. Like it or not," he grinned

without humor, "that's the law as laid down by the great god Loftus!"

I turned on him savagely, and he met my eye sidelong, in the new way he had lately; and you could have cut the hate between us with a knife. My shirt was open, and my shoulder-holstered gun was under my left arm. Jane had returned Loftus's automatic; it now swung in its open holster at his right hip. In that moment those guns filled my mind. This great ox of a man stood an immovable, stubborn barrier athwart my purpose to get Jane out of there. And I was fully in the mood to blast that barrier out of the way with gunfire, there and then.

He turned to Jane in a conciliatory way, however, before I could stutter out the words I sought.'

"I suggested another way," said Loftus quietly. "Macgregor can fly to Laguna and be back by noon. He can bring back the breaker points we need to start the launch. And he can leave word for the Laguna launch to come and meet us as we drift, in case we can't get the engine going after all. That would settle our whole quarrel, without hurt to anyone, Jane, see? And we'd all get off from her together. . . ."

It sounded so speciously reasonable, as he put it then, that I foamed at the mouth.

"And I've offered him my ship, to run the same errand if he wants to," I said. "Did he mention that?"

"I'll be glad to fly it," said Loftus slowly, "only ——" He paused, obviously waiting for a question, and I tried to snap the matter off, surprised as I was.

"Then that's settled," I said. "I'll spin the prop for you!"

"Only what, Buck?" said Jane.

"It just seemed to me," he said, "Macgregor would have a better chance of carrying the errand out, that's all. It isn't that I'm afraid of a crash, for myself. But —when I think of Jane stranded on that God-forsaken beach, just because the message doesn't happen to get to Laguna—I think that's pretty small stuff on Macgregor's part, that's all. You see, I've had the controls in my hands only twice in my life."

I started to declare that Loftus had lied; but the wind went out of me as I saw that he had me there. After all, I only had his own word that he could fly.

"You see, Joe," said Jane with an appealing smile, "it's really reasonable that you go, yourself."

I turned away, sickened, and walked to the end of

the gallery. It seemed to me then that Jane had chosen between us; and it was a heavy smash.

Jane must have understood my thoughts, for she was beside me in an instant, and her hands laced around my arm.

"Joey, Joey, what's the matter?"

What could I say?

"I know you're thinking of me," she whispered. "I understand that better than you know. But it's only for a few hours, Joe; and you know I'll be all right here, in all this sunlight, with just Mr. Heneshaw and Buck. And then we'll be away from here, sooner than any other way."

"Nobody could stop you," I said bitterly, "from coming with me, if you wanted to come."

"Oh, Joe, you know how stubborn Buck can be——"

"I'll handle him," I growled.

"Joe, fly to Laguna. Do this one thing for me—and come back just as fast as you can fly! Then all our trouble will be over. . . ."

In the end, I gave in, my resolution broken by the appeal in a girl's eyes, and the touch of her hands. Perhaps I was the only flexible factor in a situation where inflexibility meant certain disaster. Perhaps—

as I have since accused myself ten thousand times—I was a fool.

At ten-fifteen of that morning I set my floats down upon the shallow reach of salt water that gives its name to Laguna.

Two cottages, some long tool sheds, and a tall derrick which had brought in a well of nothing but brackish water were all there was of Laguna. The station still held on in the teeth of failure, pending further operations farther inland.

Here, to my astonishment, I found an old acquaintance—Jubal Wilkinson, of drinking-bout fame on that coast—in full charge of practically nothing.

"But where's Jimmy O'Hare?" I asked as I slapped Blackburn's field book on to Wilkinson's desk.

"Oh, didn't you hear? He's on his way to Russia, by now. Big offer. I relieved him here."

"Did he give you Blackburn's code?"

"Oh, no; we spoke of it, but we thought Blackburn—— Say! I heard about Blackburn's getting bumped, but—— Say! Didn't Blackburn give you the code?"

"Of course not!"

Jubal Wilkinson swore mightily, and hurled Blackburn's field book against the wall in an excess of rage.

"No report! No report! Why——" Suddenly he calmed. "What's this, though, I hear about a new disease you've got up there? A yellow boy came in——"

I cut him off, for my hands were itching for my stick. Quickly I told him the principal facts about the weird slow holocaust at the house of mahogany.

"Poor Lucretia," said Wilkinson. "Old Jimmy O'Hare will take it awful hard—if he hears about it. I guess you heard about the scandal, and old Heneshaw gunning for Jimmy O'Hare. Good old goat, though, to take Lucretia back with so little fuss. I heard——"

So that, thought I, was why Lucretia hadn't wanted to come to Laguna! Once more I cut Jubal Wilkinson short. Unquestionably Jubal was the leading scandaleer on that coast, as well as its leading drinker; and I knew he was game to talk all day, given half an opportunity.

"So Doc Harmon disappeared himself, did he?" Jubal took a new slant. "That's one thing to be glad about. I fired him, soon as I hit here. Didn't mention that, did he? No? That's why you never heard I took O'Hare's place, three weeks back, then. (O'Hare went back by Panama, in a coaster.) Harmon meant

to pump Blackburn, I suppose. Now, don't ever let on I told you this; but up the Magdalena I caught Harmon in one of the scaliest——"

It was interesting to know what Harmon had been up to at Far Rivers Mahogany. He had certainly misrepresented his connection with Blackburn's firm. Also the fact that Harmon alone knew of O'Hare's departure—a departure that meant months', or even years', delay in plotting Blackburn's notes, once Blackburn was dead—suggested dark vistas of possibility. But I had no time to listen to details of the fat driller's past.

Once again the Caribbean's leading gold mine of gossip swung off on a new tack that caught my attention. He leaned forward, puffed out bristly cheeks, and dropped his voice to an undertone.

"Did you find out what this detective was doing up there?" he asked me.

"What detective?"

"Why, this Charley Walker—didn't you know he was a Millikin Agency man? Was he still passing off as a rubber buyer? And you were taken in? That's good. Yeah, he was a dick. Now what do you suppose he was after poor old Heneshaw for? Well, nothing criminal of course—commercial snooping: that's the

Millikin strong holt. They had two other men down here once—nothing to do with Heneshaw—and one of 'em swiped the geologic survey of——"

"Now, give me Buckner Loftus," I said, marvelling.

"I don't know anything about him. I don't want to know anything about him. I got no use for these fellows that cheat at cards."

"You're sure Loftus does?"

"Caught him flat-footed! Watch that fellow. Has he pulled anything?"

"What kind of thing?"

"Well," said Jubal darkly, "some would like to know—not me, mind you. Some wonder just what did happen to his partner, that time in Yucatan. Nothing to it of course. Lost his partner of yellow fever or something—you know how people talk."

I broke away abruptly. I had certainly got more than I had come for: the key to the estrangement between Phil and Lucretia, a light upon Harmon's movements, the identity of Walker, and a dark imputation of Buckner Loftus—all in one sweep of the net! But there were no breaker points here, and Jubal had already promised to send the Laguna launch to meet us as soon as it returned from Cartagena.

I tore myself, almost by physical force, out of the clutch of his avidity for full details, and took on a tank of gas. Later I meant to probe more deeply into some of the case histories that Jubal had so readily at his tongue's end, but I was in no mood for it now. A haunting fear was on me, born of the unforgettable fact that Jane was ninety miles away in the shadow of a dread monstrosity.

The minutes dragged slowly as I revived the old OX-5, warming her; but I forced myself to wait until she was right before I finally taxied down the bay. She gathered way slowly, so that I thought she was never going to come up on to the step; but she rose at last, heavily.

And then, suddenly, in one instant of utter disaster, the flying luck went out of me. At this time of all times, and after all those years, my luck left me, the engine choked, and the prop seemed to slip its grip. Under my nose the beach rushed up, with the dark wall of the palm forest behind, and I crashed.

I had crashed before, and would crash again, but for the one supremely inopportune wash-out of my life, that one took the cake. My main float shattered on the beach as I struck, and the timber smashed a wing as she looped. Those were the chief damages,

except for a racked engine mounting. By a miracle, her prop was untouched; it was the first thing I looked at, after I had crawled from under and refocused my eyes to a point where I could see daylight again.

"You'll never fly *that* pile of bedsprings again," said Jubal, when he had found I was not much hurt.

"I'll have her in the air in six hours," I raved. I believed it then.

I still believed it when I had got her straightened out on the beach, so that I could see to just what extent she was hurt. If I had not I would surely have taken to the beach on the run, in an effort to get back afoot through the jungle to the house of mahogany. But I was certain I could get her up again; and behind me was the knowledge that the Laguna launch was due back from Cartagena in a day or two, and that it would probably beat me to Far Rivers anyway, unless I flew.

In the end, I fixed her, somehow fighting her back into shape again with wire, with clumsily shaped woods that I wrecked the side of a cottage to get, with tar, and whatever came to hand. But my six hours stretched out into geologic eons. Working night and

day, with Jubal helping as best he could, I was on that beach three days.

In a way, those were the most terrible days of my life. Jubal sent a runner to the mouth of the Estrago with supplies; we never saw him again. I suppose during that time I sometimes ate and slept, but I remember only the drinking of rum. Minute jobs of fitting absorbed a thousand motions each. The tide rose so that I worked in waist-deep water, then went back to leave the plane stranded, so that when I was ready to float her I could not. When everything else was done, I still had to find the ailment in the engine which had conked her to begin with, and that took half of the last night.

Still the Laguna launch did not return, and we knew that Riley was on spree in Cartagena, and could not be counted on definitely, if at all. And all the time I deceived myself that the end of the job was close at hand. Somehow, at last, I accomplished that repair. I could not do it again in triple the time, though I cursed my slowness then. To attempt it was folly, and to try to fly in the result was stark insanity.

But, on the morning of the fourth day, I got her up.

The Jenny roared upward, responding to her con-

trols erratically. I met the sun at five hundred feet, coming up over the edge of the world from the sea behind the far Guianas; and soon South America lay a quarter of a mile below my rudder bars, its impenetrable fastnesses exposed to my goggles, its distances crumpled. The country became less mysterious than an opened oyster. Yet—below me the jungle presently stretched compactly green, its roof almost as smooth as a field of clover; and I knew that a hundred feet below that jungle roof another sort of life flourished in semi-darkness, a world beset by unmapped morasses, through which a man had to cut his way with a machete at the rate of a few miles a week.

There was no launch on the Gulf of Tortugon, nor any sign of those I sought on its shores, though black clots of weed and flotsam on the sand lured me down in low circles a dozen times. Presently, therefore, I swung low over the delta of the Rio Estrago, and went roaring upriver. I wormed my way up the dark stream as low and as slowly as I dared; and was convinced, as half an hour later I made a landing before the house of mahogany, that I could have missed no party on the river.

When I had secured the crate to the rotting landing

I went up the path at a run, calling Jane's name; and a new dread was upon me.

No place of recent habitation ever looked more deserted than that one did under the pitiless blaze of the morning sun. Its drab peeling paint and rusting screens were as I had left them; but on the front gallery the screen door sagged crooked and gaping from one twisted hinge, and that by itself was enough to give the place a look of unspeakable abandonment.

As I ran up the steps something stirred in the living room, and my heart jumped; but when I entered I found it to be only a great black clot of fruit bats which hung like umbrellas from a corner of the ceiling. They had pulled part of the ceiling cloth loose from the rafters, and as I went in a progressive undulation in the cloth showed where something lithe and heavy moved off from above me, hammocking itself in the canvas. Yet the furniture in that room was curiously in order, as if I had never been away.

It was possible, I knew, that I had missed the launch in my flight up the Estrago, but I did not believe this likely, unless it was under the dark waters. Nor could I understand why the party had not at least reached the delta, even if they had started a day later than they had intended.

My mind was full of the face of Jane Corliss, and the sound of her voice, and the exalting touch of her fingers as they had laced about my arm. And a cold fear was constricting my throat as I walked through the house, looking about me with searching eyes.

CHAPTER XXI

Few details, I think, escaped me in that hour as I moved through the house in which Jane Corliss had been, and from which she was mysteriously gone.

In the kitchen on the rear gallery a pan of cold dishwater stood on the table, with dishes and silver in it, half washed. The dishes in the pan were those of an evening meal for two people—only two.

When I had discovered this I walked out to the graves at the edge of the clearing to see if a fourth had been added to the three accounted for. There had not. A mahogany marker had been set up, however, at the head of Lucretia Heneshaw's grave. It was very tall, weathered, and had a sort of molding around the edge, so that I walked around behind it to see what it was. Sure enough, it was the long sign that had marked the front of the station when the project was new. Still legible in cracked and chipping paint were the words "Far Rivers," running downward and losing themselves in the soil. The thing was so grotesquely pat—the flamboyant name of an

optimistic tropic enterprise on one side and a white woman's epitaph on the other—that I had an exasperated impulse to rip the thing up and sail it into the tangle.

Back in the house again, out of the smashing sunlight, I walked slowly through the rooms, undecided between taking the air to sweep the river again, or having a try at the Tambos trail. Coming to my own room, where lay my impedimenta, I opened one of my canvas kits in search of a cigarette. A small folded paper fell out, and I seized upon it as I perceived the handwriting upon it to be Jane's.

The communication it bore had no beginning and no end, for it was obviously the middle sheet of several.

. . . that he has [it began]. While he was gone, of course I was afraid something terrible had happened to him; but now that he is back, and we are alone here, I almost wish that he had not returned. He has become silent and moody, and often sits and watches me in a way that gives me the creeps. Joe, I am almost certain that he is not in his right mind. He, of all people! Maybe I partly imagine it, because of the terrible things that have happened here; and I have worried too about what has become of you. I know that something must have happened to your plane, and I am praying that you are safe, for I will never forget that I was

the one who sent you, when you certainly had a hunch not to go.

Later. After last night's horrible . . .

The closely written page ended. Hurriedly I ransacked my things, searching for the other pages, but without success. The vague but hideous implications of that incomplete letter had an effect upon me directly opposite to what I would have expected, for the fever and flurry went out of me, and I was rendered singularly clear-minded and cold.

I was asking myself who it was who had gone away, and returned, and had thereafter been with Jane alone. It could have been Loftus, Heneshaw, or Dan Corliss himself—even Doc Harmon. Searching the page, word by word, I got no clue to this, except that Harmon seemed unlikely.

The page that I possessed had been folded by itself, suggesting that for some reason the other pages had been destroyed, leaving only this incomplete one to be thrust into my kit—hurriedly, I knew, since it had been wedged in without opening the catch—in a forlorn, perhaps desperate hope that from it I would gather enough of her message.

I tried to imagine what could have been "last

night's horrible" happening. The word "later" suggested that the clause referred to something that had occurred after I had gone. Without further data I could neither guess the nature of the horror, nor conceive what chain of circumstances had caused the abandonment of the plan to leave the place, and had finally left Jane there alone with a single man. As yet only one thing was certain: that of eight, I alone remained, alive, at the house of mahogany.

I returned to the kitchen and examined the half-washed dishes more carefully. A crude rag-and-grease lamp stood, burned out, on a shelf over the table, telling me that whatever had last come upon this house had come not only suddenly, but after dark. But whether the ultimate catastrophe had descended upon the house in complete darkness, or whether the lamp had been left lighted, and burned out afterward, I could not tell.

Now I closely examined the empty tin cans in the rubbish box; and here, judging by the comparative progress of ants and mold, I definitely concluded that the last occupants of the house of mahogany had left it no earlier than the night before. How quickly and boldly those great black fruit bats had moved in! As if the voices of the dead, who, the

Chocos think, talk to bats, had told them that those who were gone from here would never return. . . .

From the kitchen I went to Jane's room. I knew that she must have packed her things shortly after my hop from the river, for she had expected to leave by midday. It was evident, however, that they had either been ransacked, or that she had unpacked them again—perhaps in searching for that little gun Dan Corliss had left her? Over the neatly made bed and upon a rattan chair were strewn a dozen or so feminine articles that for an instant brought Jane vividly before me, as if she were in the room—and the next instant made her seem more than ever lost and far away.

A meticulously thorough search through Jane's possessions brought to light a hundred things that reconstructed her presence here, but the remainder of the letter was not among them, nor any recognized clue to what had taken place. Only, the fact that she had left her suitcases behind verified what I already had learned in the kitchen—that departure from this place had been made without preparation, and in haste.

Already the jungle was coming into this room, for an eight-inch centipede clung to a post of the bed,

and upon the open door of the armoire a large lizard rested, very flat and protectively colored except for bright watchful eyes. I went out of that room sick at heart, and with a powerful urge upon me to make an immediate roaring search of river and jungle by air. But I was held back from this foolishness by an even stronger conviction that the answer to my questions was here in this house, if I could only read it; and that only when those mysteries were answered would I know where to look for Jane.

Heneshaw's message was my next reward. It was written in pencil on the darkened top of the living-room table, so that it had at first escaped me. There were only four words, written in the enormous swerving scrawl of a man in great haste:

For God's sake follow.

It was signed "Philip Heneshaw," and I recognized the signature as authentic, in spite of its hurried distortion. Not a word about where they were to be followed, however. What idiocies people are capable of in moments of pressure! Here was an urgent message, rendered absolutely worthless for want of a directing word.

No corner of that house was sufficiently insignificant or improbable to escape my attention now. I took almost a full hour to the living room, sifting it down to the last phonograph needle, without learning anything to my purpose. Heneshaw's desk, which I had to jimmy open, was interesting, as revealing of the man, but contained nothing to the point. I spent half an hour rifling his papers, in the hope of finding the missing pages Jane had written. There was a great mass of correspondence, much of it in commercial code which I did not stop to decipher, although there was a code book in the desk.

Two things I learned about Heneshaw that were surprising to me. In the first place, the varied and intricate nature of the correspondence, together with that extraordinary collection of minutely penned maps, revealed a scope of imaginative ambition that I had never suspected in him. Fusty old Heneshaw, the neat, meticulous little man who always took care of himself, had been an empire builder, in his dreams! Paper empires—that was it; the desk was full of them. It was the sort of thing you would have expected of a much younger man.

The second item appeared when I forced open a deep lower drawer and found that what looked like

some stacks of old letters were really the concealment of fourteen or fifteen bottles of a low grade of Colombian rum. There had been weak spots, certainly, in the search we had made for poison. Heneshaw was not, however, the first secret drinker I had known on that coast, and I wasted little time over this discovery.

Nothing of assistance was brought to light by a new combing through the belongings of Loftus, Harmon, and Walker, nor among Heneshaw's clothing, nor in the locker of Dan Corliss, which I forced for no reason except my own stubborn thoroughness.

I searched Lucretia's room last.

What instantly struck me here was that no trace of Lucretia's past occupancy was visible as I entered. The litter of stuff that always stands on a woman's dresser was gone; and the drawers of the dresser proved entirely emptied. Whoever had accomplished this removal, however, had failed to reach the armoire; for here Lucretia's dresses still hung in a varicolored, if somewhat faded, array.

I started to pull these out, but checked myself. I was thinking of Jane's description of Lucretia's movements on the morning before she died; and I now compelled myself to stand there going through vague

fumbling motions with my hands, as I knew Lucretia had done. It was very faint, at best, my hope of finding the lost clue that I believed Lucretia to have recovered from the living room. But I was working carefully and thoroughly now, passing by no chance conceivable to me. And presently, idly running my fingers into the turned-up cuff of a dress with long sleeves, I thought I found what I sought.

My fingers encountered a coarse fragment of something unlike the material of the dress. I turned down the cuff, and there fell into my hand a thread or two of a harsh blue cloth.

It was something less than a tatter, that fragment, and something more than a raveling: a woven unit of three or four heavy threads, a couple of inches long. Not the sort of thing that would find its way into the cuff of a voile dress, in the ordinary course of events. If it had been rolled into a tiny ball in the fingers it could have been dropped unnoticed, and remained undiscovered forever. Yet, I could understand how its size and weight might have been exaggerated in the eyes of a distraught woman, so that she should have sought to conceal it here.

There were shirts of this coarse blue material in the kits of both Loftus and Harmon—something less

than a coincidence, for I could have named the outfitter's store in Colón where they were bought, and I had once owned the like myself.

Immediately I made a fresh ransack through both Harmon's and Loftus's clothing, looking for the shirt from which this fragment could have been torn. To my disappointment, this was a signal failure, for Harmon's shirts were too faded to match the raveling; and Loftus's, which lay folded in the bottom of one of his kits, had evidently never been worn. Nor could I remember anyone's having worn a blue shirt during those horror-laden days and nights of the murders. Once more I was fronting a blank wall, with my search of the house of mahogany completed and my next step as undecided as before.

Slowly I returned to the room I had shared with Buck Loftus, and there washed my hands painstakingly. Then I stood looking out into the sun-whipped clearing.

Everything I needed for the solution of the mystery of the house of mahogany was in my hands. I thought that then, and it was true. My mind raced over all that I knew, from my first sight of the black cat-footed monster that had rushed through the house on the night of Blackburn's death, to the last counting

of the poisoned quinine capsules. Never have details from the past been as distinct in my mind. I checked the positions of each one of us in the case of each murder; and I think I had sharply in my mind every movement, every inflection of a voice that had happened there, at all the times when I had been present.

Yet, one fact eluded me, a fact that I was sure I knew. Some apparent triviality was escaping my memory—one small detail that I knew was the key to all the rest. I even knew what made it possible for that lost clue to elude me: that it was something too simple, too obvious—so that the mind was carried over it by the very earnestness of its own searching. Something as obvious as the device of the poisoner, and of as sinister a simplicity. . . .

It is time to say that I now felt that I was being watched, that there were eyes upon me—but this is not true. I was deep in my own attempt at logic, and I sensed no approach by any creak of flooring nor the stir of a breath of air. Instead I was caught completely by surprise, so that when a voice spoke behind me I whirled as if I had been struck.

What I heard was a whimpered oath, a broken bear-like snarl of anger that I had noticed three times before; and I knew before I set eyes on him that

Buckner Loftus stood behind me, in the door of the room.

He was in almost as bad shape as Walker had been upon the night he reappeared from the jungle. His eyes were bloodshot and haggard; and what was left of his shirt clung in gray saturation over those great muscles of his torso. I saw his holster swung empty at his thigh.

I shouted at him, "Where's Jane?"

Probably he did not get the sense of my question, there was such intensity in his own as he snarled at me, "What have you done with her? What have you done with her?"

"I left her here with you," said I, bitter slow.

He started to say something, but his voice broke into that fantastic and terrible falsetto whimper; then a great bitter joy of impact swept into me as Buckner Loftus put his head down and rushed.

CHAPTER XXII

WITHIN five seconds I knew that I was fighting for my life. I was still uncertain whether the black cat-footed beast that had been a walking death among us now opposed me in the person of Buckner Loftus. But as the terrific grappling-hook grip of his hands closed in the muscles of my neck I knew that I was facing death enough.

As he rushed I crouched and drove forward to meet him. His chin was out of reach against his chest, so I caught him squarely between the eyes with a left-hand smash. Everything I had was behind it, and a bone snapped in my left hand with a shock that struck like a heavy electric voltage through wrist and shoulder. I had meant to lift his head, so that I could bring my right up to his jaw, but I might as well have flung my fist against a landslide. His head did not rise, and the drive of his bull-like charge was not checked a fraction of an inch.

In the next split second I was crumpled by the shock of the impact, and hurled backward against the window ledge with a force that I thought had

broken my back. The screen ripped out, and I was bent backward over the sill, with Loftus upon me and his big hands clamped into my neck. I had hunched my shoulders, burying my chin, so that it was only the muscles that he got those iron fingers into; but it seemed that his hands were capable of pulling a man apart.

My unbroken hand found the side of the window, and with a supreme effort I doubled up, carrying him with me as I rolled backward out the window. His grip slackened for an instant as we struck the ground on heads and shoulders, so that I was able to wrench free and stagger up.

The smash between the eyes must have blinded him temporarily, and I think I could have eluded his rushes if I had had the sense. I should have sidestepped, ducking and weaving, and wearing him down with a jabbing right hand, since my left was finished. Or I should have recovered my automatic, which had tumbled out of its holster as we fell. But an insane anger was in me, an accumulation from the days of worry and suspense, so that there was a haze in my eyes and a taste of copper in my mouth; and I met him better than halfway as he got to his feet and came on.

Once more his great driving weight carried me back, but I kept my feet, and twice missed with my right hand. We locked close, and he put a right hook to my ribs fit to stop my heart, if it had not been too high. If he had kept on with those crushing body hooks he would have had me. But the darkness must still have been in his eyes, for he seemed afraid to let me get out of his hands, and he clinched, one hand fumbling upward for my throat.

That man was like an inhuman machine; nothing about him seemed to give. To try to elbow his blows aside was like elbowing the throw of a steam piston, and when I tried to thrust him off it was like shoving a stone wall—a wall that gripped with iron arms. I got an elbow into his throat, and put my right twice to the body, and then up to the jaw.

Already the weariness of my night-and-day labors at Laguna was beginning to bind my arms. I found the side of his jaw open, and again hooked with everything I had; but my arm seemed to move slowly, like an imagining in a fever dream, ignoring the frantic commands from my brain, which remained clear. Three times I threw short hooks into his jaw, without any effect.

The elbow in his throat seemed to do the work,

however, for he broke for a new hold. I feinted with my left, which was silly, for he noticed nothing, but I closed his left eye as he came in. Again we clinched, and he tried to foul me by bringing up a knee. This seemed a good idea, and I fouled him instead, so that he dropped back for another instant.

This time he lashed out with both hands as he came in, and a wild haymaker caught me on the left temple, and the floor of the clearing leaped upward. Instinct made me double up and roll backward, shoulders under, flinging him off with my knees as he hurled himself upon me. I was half blind as I struggled up and met him; and I clung to him for support as he sent those blasting right and left hooks into my body. Then as he clinched again I felt a quiver in the clamp of his arms, and knew that the days behind us were telling on him, too. With a convulsive effort I fought him off again.

The rest was a half-blind flurry of blows. I think we stood toe to toe and slugged, swinging as drunkenly as if neither one of us had ever in his life pulled on a glove. But the ground was shifting and spinning under my feet, so maybe we fought all up and down the clearing, or maybe I sent only wild swings at him as he drove me back. Two or three times I threw my

broken left hand into his face, hardly noticing the red lightning this sent up my arm.

He was gasping out those mad bearlike whimpers; I could hear that. But in all that blaze of sunlight I could only see him as a looming, swaying form that repeatedly exploded in my face. It was my sickening futile anger that was holding me up. I knew that if he got his hands on my throat again, that would be all; but if I was fully conscious of anything it was of a terrible desire to smash this man down, and I kept striking out with a weak, insensible right that often missed, as if I were fighting in the dark.

If you have ever worn six-ounce gloves you will know what happened then as well as I, who know almost nothing about it at all. Sometimes there is a fight in which you hit a man with everything you have without seeming to hurt him, and you know that he is too much for you and will win. And then in a muddled flurry of blows, perhaps, your man suddenly drops for no reason, so that you don't know which hand you hit him with, or what happened. As you stand there blowing, slowly realizing that you have stopped your man, you know that no credit is coming to you for that fight; and that your opponent has been put out not by you, but by luck, just as

much as if something had fallen on him from outside the fight altogether.

That was what happened now. I suddenly found myself standing alone in the sunlight, with Buckner Loftus pitched on his face, motionless, before me. To this day I don't know what chance blow knocked Loftus out.

There was no sense of victory in me, or relief, as I walked off. I almost blundered into the side of the house; and when I leaned against it my knees slowly gave from under me without any volition of my own, and I sat there trying to get my breath. I have one foolish memory—that of gasping out an idiotic line from some story I once read: "'Throw a bucket of water on him and let him come on. . . .'" A spectator would not have been able to tell who had won, if anybody had.

Fifteen feet away Buck Loftus stirred. "Yeah," he muttered, "I'm coming on, all right." He struggled to get to his hands and knees, and shook his head as he accomplished it.

The anger was out of me, giving place to a vast sense of physical misery. Slowly I was remembering what I was here for, which was to find Jane. Whaling the stuffing out of Buckner Loftus, if possible at all,

was only an incidental job—one of the Herculean but meaningless tasks that crop up to delay a man. Then suddenly I realized that I had spent almost my entire reserve energy in an effort to beat the consciousness out of my only remaining source of information. I found my gun and picked it up out of the dirt.

Loftus's red eyes wandered vaguely before they successfully settled upon me. "I'm not through with you," he growled.

"Nor I with you," I answered. "But first, we're going to stop this while you tell me what you know."

"What makes you think so?" he mumbled savagely, trying to get up.

He did not seem to see my weapon until I let off a shot in the air to warn him. Then the whole aspect of the man changed, his belligerence giving way to an ironical resignation.

"Missed me," he said stupidly.

"I didn't aim at you, you fool!"

"Go ahead with it," he taunted me. "Why didn't you think of that before? I had you, and I lost you. You're yellow. You won't stand and fight."

This seemed surprising under the circumstances, but I had no energy for resentment left. I hung doggedly to my intention to pry out of Loftus what-

ever he knew about what had happened while I was away from the house of mahogany.

"Go ahead and let go with it," he said again. "I'm coming to take it away from you, in a minute."

"I'll lam you, all right," I told him, "when I get ready to. First I'm going to know what you've done with Jane."

"You're the one," said he dully, "to answer that."

"I crashed at Laguna," I said. "I landed here this morning and found the place deserted. Now you turn up alone. I'm going to know why."

"I don't believe you," he mumbled automatically.

"If you want anything done toward getting Jane out of this jungle I advise you to tell what you know!"

He was eyeing my gun steadily. In the dazed condition of his stubborn one-track mind, the weapon was absorbing his whole attention. On a reckless impulse I threw the gun as far as I could out into the clearing. His eyes raised to my face and he stared at me dumbfounded.

"I don't want you," I told him. "For the thousandth time—all I want is to get Jane Corliss out of this death trap!"

There was no comprehension in his face as he

lurched to his feet and came toward me, and with a great effort I struggled up to meet him. He swerved, however, plodding slowly, and slumped down to sit beside me against the house.

I dug out my cigarettes, and tossed one to him with a shaky hand. He was unable to get a match going, however, and had to come hunching along the wall to light his cigarette from my own.

"Maybe I got you wrong," he admitted, mumbling through a split lip. "I guess anyway, maybe, you're her best bet if I don't do any better than I've been doing. How the devil did *you* ever drop me?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I'll tell you my side of it, anyway, I guess," he said slowly.

He inhaled to the bottom of his lungs, and after a moment or two began a wandering tale, full of cut-backs such as "about an hour before that . . ." and "I forgot to say . . ." What it boiled down to was this:

A few minutes before noon, on the day I left, he had managed to get the launch engine running at last, and was for shoving off. Jane insisted, however, that they wait until noon for my return, as they had promised to do. And in spite of Loftus's insistence

that I could find them on the river all right, they had waited at the mahogany landing.

At almost the last minute a Choco native, of the runty canoe-boy type, had come trotting out of one of the jungle trails. He brought a note, scribbled on the leaf of a field book, which he delivered to Jane. Loftus did not have the note, but clearly remembered its wording. It said:

JANE—I guess I have got to have some help this time. If there is a good man there you can trust, send him to me without letting anybody know. But anyway send someone. For God's sake don't try to come yourself. But don't fail me, send a man. The Old Man is pretty close to up against it, this time. This boy knows where I am.

The handwriting was almost unrecognizable—a big loose scrawl, as if somebody had written it with his left hand. But of course Jane Corliss knew instantly that it was from her father. And she knew that he was in a bad way, or he would not have asked help, since he had been so independent about that sort of thing for so long.

When she showed it to Buck Loftus he said, "So this is what you've been waiting for. What made you expect this?" And she answered, "Just a hunch, I guess."

There seemed no more to be said. Loftus walked off into the jungle at the heels of that native. The Choco man led him through a maze of trails that were no more than ways through the tangle, unmarked by any sign of a path. But he knew they must have been trails, because it was possible to get through. Within four hours Loftus was completely lost.

Then, at dusk, the Choco runner faded out. The man simply got a little too far ahead of Loftus in the tangle, and disappeared. Loftus shouted and hunted for him for an hour, before he sensibly gave up and made himself as comfortable as he could for the night, which turned out to be a long one—the longest he had ever known.

The next morning there was still no sign of his guide. Loftus tried to follow on along the trail they had been taking, but could not even find it. After that he wasted a half day trying to break through to the river, which he had known must be somewhere to the west of him, but failed in this. He was at last reduced to back-trailing himself—a slow and tricky business, but a wise one, for it is doubtful if any amount of luck would have brought him back to the clearing any other way.

The second day he had shot a monkey with his automatic; but later he had lost the gun entirely, and had since traveled without food. He had finally reached the house of mahogany just after dawn of the fourth day, having come within two hundred yards of it without knowing it on the evening before. There he had found the same desertion that had greeted me later in the morning; and when he had bolted a can or two of beans he had immediately taken to the jungle again, this time searching the Tambos trail. The roar of my plane had drawn him back.

His story carried conviction, so far as it went. He had the look, though, of a man holding back something. I poked tentatively at a discrepancy in his story.

"The launch was gone when you got back here?"

"Yes," he said, regarding me sidelong.

"And yet you immediately turned to exploring the Tambos trail?"

He did not answer, but sat waiting, looking at me steadily with squinted red eyes.

"Why?" I demanded.

"I've been waiting to see," he told me, "if you happen to know why."

"Well, I don't! Come out with it now!"

His eyes wandered slowly over the floor of the clearing; and after a moment he rose so leisurely that he almost fooled me. My wits returned to me in time, however, and at the last instant I caught his ankle and sent him sprawling. Instantly I was up on the run; and when he saw that I was ahead of him he did not attempt to beat me to the automatic I had thrown away.

CHAPTER XXIII

When I went back to Loftus, the gun in my shoulder holster once more, he turned to cursing me, slowly, with deliberate emphasis. He did a thorough job. I had thrown the gun away in an effort to confuse him and get him to talk. No hope of getting into his confidence had been in my mind, and now that the weapon was back where it belonged, I felt better.

I now examined my hand, which I had broken in the first blow of our fight, and found the fracture to be much simpler than I had feared, considering the abuse I had given it afterward. I went into the house, and took time to bind it up as best I could. Thereafter that hand remained an almighty painful annoyance, gnawing perpetually at my attention at times when I needed all the wits I had.

He was sitting on the steps of the front gallery when I went out again.

"Well," I demanded, "have you made up your mind to tell what you know?"

He remained sulkily silent, and I went past him

and toward the landing. I half expected him to spring on me from behind, but I don't think there was that much energy left in the man, then. His great strength, fortunately, did not seem to be enforced by a comparable endurance.

Nevertheless, he presently followed me down to the landing. I paid no attention to him, but I could feel his brooding red eyes upon me, whatever I did.

On the planks of the landing I found what I had not seen before, in my haste to reach the house: a hastily penciled arrow, drawn three feet long, but almost invisible on the gray boards. It pointed upstream.

"You found this?" I asked Loftus.

"Not so quickly as you did," he commented significantly. "But I found it all right."

I studied him, wondering if I dared trust him to swing my prop.

"You'll have to help me start my engine," I decided. "I'm going upstream."

"You won't need the engine," he told me. "You needn't pretend you don't know it's only a step."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I found the launch all right," said he.

I smothered a furious retort, but took his hint and made my way upstream on foot, clambering over

the steplike roots of the cypress. Once more he followed me.

Only two hundred yards upstream from the landing, but well concealed, I came upon the Far Rivers launch, sunk to her gunwales in the blackwater shallows under the cypress.

My breath caught once in my throat; then I was thigh deep in the thick mucky water that filled the launch, groping over the duckboards in its bottom with my good hand. Painstakingly I groped inch by inch the length of the launch under the oily water, my movements heavy with dread. Loftus meanwhile sat on a root, and watched me with an expression of black irony.

It was a vast relief when I reached the stern without making any discovery. However, on the submerged seat in the stern my fingers found a small loose object at the last moment, and I brought it to light.

The thing was a pair of sun glasses. They had violet glass, which is uncommon, and I recognized them as the property of Phil Heneshaw. One lens was smashed utterly, but all around the margin of the bow the minute splinters of violet glass still hung. It was exactly the sort of shatter that a bullet would make—

fired at short range, so that the bullet had not had time to steady the first wobble of its flight.

At this discovery Loftus showed interest for the first time. "I missed that," he admitted. "Say—he isn't in there, is he?"

"No."

"Over the side, likely," Loftus suggested. "Well, there's your fourth!" He absently changed a phrase or two of blues, under his breath: "'It's just another —good ma-a-an—nailed down!'"

"Shut your head," I snarled at him.

My exploration of the mucky river bottom in the neighborhood was hurried, but even so I found the catamaranned double pirogue that Loftus and I had rigged four days before. Once more we were up against a disappearance without means of transportation.

"God in heaven!" Loftus burst out, almost as if the whole situation had dawned on him for the first time. "What are we up against here? Three dead, and four disappeared—counting Dan Corliss! Gone without a trace, or any boat, or trail! It's like a great tentacle reached out of the river, and hauled them under!"

This unusual flight of imagination caught my attention. I studied him, for I thought there was a ring of insincerity in that outburst. His face was gray,

but that was perhaps exhaustion. The shudder that crossed his shoulders seemed real enough—but I could not be sure.

The Estrago itself was now drawn definitely into the fabric of our hideous situation, like a slimy thread. The black river had taken all trace of Harmon, and now apparently the body of Heneshaw. And it was to the river that Heneshaw had evidently tried to guide us by that last hastily scrawled message on the dining-room table, and by the arrow drawn on the landing.

"For God's sake follow . . ." The sunken launch and the bullet-smashed glasses now immeasurably intensified that panic-stricken fragment of a message. He had led us such a little way before he had come, apparently, to the end of all trails.

But my own trail stretched on.

"You can come with me or not," I told Buckner Loftus. "I don't care what you do."

"Where you going?"

"Up river. There's a Choco village within twenty miles. If anybody knows what has passed up and down this river, those little brown men know. I'm going to them."

Loftus wavered—or pretended to. "There was

that native," he said, "that talked to Harmon, and the one that lost me in the timber. . . . This isn't Chocoman work, any of it; but Chocomen seemed to have been used. I'll come along."

"Suit yourself."

He swung the prop for me, and got into the forward cockpit. When the motor had warmed up we took off, climbing sluggishly. There was a bad moment while the tree tops at the bend seemed to clutch upward at our floats, as if we would trip and crash. She was acting curiously, seeming to scramble ineffectively at the air. We got up, however, circled once, and went roaring upstream, toward the heart of the West Jungle.

A quarter of an hour brought us over the village we were after—a straggling dozen or so of stilt-legged huts, pinched between river and forest. I swung lower, up river and down, in a mile-wide circle, looking for a place to land; and a crowd that had gathered in the village to watch us broke and ran for the jungle like ants.

Then, down a long vista between the river trees that opened as we wheeled, I suddenly caught a glimpse of something white, a speck against the jungle shadows.

The old tea kettle shuddered with the burst of gas I gave her as I banked sharply and took her thundering down river. Three miles below the village a single hut, long and boxlike, stood alone. On its roof stood something that seemed to move and signal behind the heat waves, as if a figure in civilized garb were waving to us there.

We zoomed over a tall rocky spur of the jungle. Loftus looked back at me, his face gray under his goggles, as I flung the rickety ship downward between the very trees, and swung on one wing tip around the lonely hut in a reverse-control, tree-hemmed bank that would have had my own gizzard in my throat at another time.

At first the true nature of what I had seen was a bitter disappointment. The idea had seized me that Jane Corliss herself was signaling us from the roof of that hut. The figure that we sought reduced, however, to an empty drape of cloth; and as we at last swirled on wing ends, almost within touching distance of the hut itself, the thing shrunk to a man's shirt, suspended on a pole by its sleeves.

But I still was unable to believe that I had not found that which I sought. If I had obeyed impulse I would have slammed the ship headlong into the trees

beside the hut, forgetting everything but the instant necessity of rushing into the grass structure in search of Jane. Instead I zoomed savagely, and sought a place to come down on the river.

The jungle-threading strand of water twisted and turned below us, offering no landing without a crash in the trees, or else a pancaking of the weakened landing structure. We went twisting and side-slipping downstream through the forest, and a good mile was behind us before I rose, circled, cut the gun, and smacked her on to the water. Even there I think we would have piled up, but we grounded on a sandbar that not quite nosed us over, and stopped just short of the mangroves.

I had expected to taxi upstream to the signal hut, but a boulder-set riffle made this impossible. Under the shore tangle, swirling with an incessant murmur through the water-gnome vaults of the mangrove roots, a deep channel of black water ran, carrying the mass of the river; but this was no good to us, and after a hurried exploration of the river bed we were forced to moor.

The jungle waded out into the stream knee deep, and the river was full of black holes in which we knew the alligators lay thick as pigs in a litter, under

the dark water. We were forced to get out the machete I always carried in the plane, and take to the jungle itself.

We took turns cutting the way, slashing foot by foot through vine and thorn and festooned saw-grass that can cut to the bone with a touch. That is a country for canoes—or jungle men. One of us would fight the tangle for five minutes, then drop back with scarlet face and streaming body while the other drove ahead for a little way. I was light-headed and weak, and Loftus was little better. But we got on, Buck sustained by his great strength, I by an implacable cold fury. Sometimes a bit of beach or a thin spot let us run a few paces; but these were few.

I don't know how long we fought upstream along the jungled shore. It must have been long past noon when we sighted the hut at last.

Even as we came out into the sunlight of the hut's clearing the tangle held us yet, for cecropia and bamboo had crept in where the older tangle had been cleared. To the very foot of the notched pole that led twelve feet upward to the floor of the hut, it was a scrap every yard of the way.

Loftus was in the lead here. As we came into the sunlight he shouted Jane's name. There was no reply.

Not an insect nor leaf seemed to stir in that brilliant blazing cup of heat for the long moment in which we stood listening, and the pounding of my heart was heavy in my ears.

Then Loftus plunged forward, stumbling, weaving, slashing, in a rush that carried him to the foot of the hut's long stilt legs, and clambered up the notched pole that served as a ladder.

I was at his heels as he faltered and stopped, head and shoulders above the floor in the hut's low doorway. The sudden start that ran through him almost knocked me off that precarious pole.

His sudden fixity told me that he had not found emptiness. Yet for a long quarter of a minute he stood there, silent, staring into the hut.

"Buck! What is it?"

My hungry muscles were quivering from that long struggle in the heat, and to cling to the notched pole any longer was itself an insuperable effort.

"Damn it, get in there, if you're going!"

He seemed not to hear me; but at last he moved upward slowly, cautiously, like a man about to spring on something, and disappeared within. I surged upward after him, and tumbled inward to sprawl foolishly on hands and knees on the bamboo floor.

CHAPTER XXIV

Buck was bending over a figure half propped up in the far end of the hut, twenty feet away. Through the decaying roof the sunlight laced the shadows in a thousand streaks and speckles, each one of them as sharp to the eye as the stroke of a knife; and this welter of light and shadow confused the eye, so that it was hard to know just what you were looking at, at first.

The face of the propped up figure was visible beneath Buck's elbow as he bent. And what seemed to freeze me where I sprawled was not so much the deathlike mask of that face as the fact that eyes gleaming from it were fixed directly upon my own.

I think I have never seen on any man a face so full of death. Bloodless, drawn, lifeless, gaunt with the emaciation from which no recovery can be imagined, and with only the fever-bright eyes to say that it was not the mask of death itself, it was hard for me to recognize at first, or recognizing believe, that this was the face of Dan Corliss.

The father of Jane Corliss had been a man with a square, kindly face, set with eyes that were mild, practical, and awake. But at the same time those eyes had always harbored a peculiar deep-set spark that perhaps explained why he was not the midland-States business man which he otherwise appeared.

His big-boned frame would have been heavily beefed if he had followed the normal routine of civilized life. But the little buried spark behind his eyes drove him questing all his life, and kept him lean.

You can see that same small fire burning clear and pure, everlastingly young, in the eyes of that line of explorers of whom the lost Amundsen was the grand old chief. It goes with faces that are carved into hard, prematurely old lines by the rigors of active lives, but whose eyes suggest kindly old hawks, with something visible in them that can never turn away from the subtle silent call of unknown trails.

By all rights that spark should have been at its lowest flicker now, for a living man can hardly look farther gone than Dan Corliss did then. Yet, the spark was there; and the eyes that harbored it were direct and calm, unfearing. The same girl who was my own reason for existence was this man's reason

why he must not yet die here in the jungle. His very necessity of life seemed to have given him an unwavering faith in his ability to survive.

One other thing must be said about Dan Corliss. The faces of Loftus and myself showed a gross stubble, but old Dan's did not. Every day of his life, impeded by whatever torture of pain or weakness, that man had managed to shave, and his gray mustache was neatly trimmed.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Corliss, in a voice as thin and dry as the rustle of bamboo. "I'm not seein' things, am I?"

"Not this time, Dan."

"Certainly wasn't expectin' anybody," said that dusty whisper of a voice. "Have somethin' to eat."

Near him stood some crude clay pots containing papaya, plantain, and a barbecued joint of wild pig.

"Not eatin' very much, myself," Corliss told us. "The junglies keep bringin' the stuff in, anyway. I seem to stand all right with them. I chew these leaves, mostly."

He indicated, with a faint gesture of not more than one yellowed finger, a bunch of ugly red-brown tissues, which looked as if they would cure a man if they didn't kill him first.

"What on earth are you down with?" Buck asked him.

"Asthma," said Corliss astonishingly.

"*Asthma?*"

"With some complications, maybe," Corliss admitted. "But it's wonderful how asthma can choke up a man."

A swift suspicion made me look at his fingernails; and I shivered as I saw that they were almost black.

"We flew in to make some maps—camera stuff," I said hurriedly, fearing Loftus would forestall me with the truth. This old man, already clinging to life by a sufficiently thin thread, was in no shape to sustain the shock of the truth concerning his daughter.

"Get Phil Heneshaw to show you his maps—if you can," Corliss suggested faintly. "He can show you stuff that'll make a monkey out of your camera. He's probably got more rivers that ain't here, and more mountains where swamps should be, than any livin' man. And when it comes to oil—say, he's found the main valve, where it *all* is. All just from talkin' to Indians." He grinned weakly. "Don't tell him I said so. . . . Did you—did you see Jane on the way down?" He asked almost shyly.

"She's getting on fine," Loftus blurted out.

"She's in Panama," I put in, and mumbled some vague explanation which Corliss seemed to accept.

"It's just as well," he said. He turned his eyes—nothing but his eyes—to study Loftus uncertainly for a moment. Buck flushed and attempted a grin that was not a success.

"Don't fret yourself, boy," Corliss said to him, "if you have your little ups and downs with Jane. Women are that way, that's all. You stand all right with me," he added, "as young squirts go."

To the very end, Corliss always believed in Buckner Loftus.

The papery face of the sick man now warmed in a smile that brought the life back into it for a minute. An unusually kindly, warm smile Corliss had. It recalled Jane's own smile, which was like a light turned on within.

"Nothing could happen to her, of course," he said. "But a man's mind gets to wandering, sometimes, if he's laid up in the jungle.

"A funny thing happened the other night," he went on after a few moments. "I'd drug myself to the door, for a breath of air. It was moonlight. And I thought I saw a man I used to know. Seemed like he went by in a canoe, with two Indians. Just as plain

as I see you fellows right now. Plainer. Man by the name of Harmon. Of course it couldn't have been——" He turned a cautiously questioning eye from one to the other of us.

"Not that I know of," Loftus lied, answering the unspoken question.

"When was it?" I asked.

"Few nights ago. A man loses track. But just as plain—paddles up, and drifting past just as quiet as the water. I even hailed him, he looked so real."

Studiously I avoided looking at Loftus, fearful that Corliss might read any glance that passed between us now.

"I guess I'm a poor one," Corliss was saying, "to laugh at old Heneshaw for rediscoverin' the continental divide, and figurin' it's just one big anticline full of oil. It's wonderful what a man will figure out, given time and a little fever. Wallie Harkness used to see a jaguar climbin' into the hut. Had to be tied. . . ."

Game, practical old man, I thought, so unwilling to believe the improbable that he preferred to discredit his own eyes! All he said about needing help was in the form of an apology for that shirt he had hung up, "thinkin' somebody might possibly be passin' by . . ."

When I asked him why he hadn't sent for help, he

said he didn't want to worry Jane. This destroyed all doubt as to the forgery of the note that had lured Loftus into the tangles—if Loftus had told the truth, and there had been such a note at all.

Loftus and I made an excuse to go outside for a whispered conference. We had to take Corliss back with us, of course. The question was between the house of mahogany and Laguna. Laguna would have been better for Corliss, certainly; but we decided upon the house of mahogany, where we could take care of him until—until what? Until all hope was behind us, and we should leave the house of mahogany forever.

We carried him back, laboriously, through the path that we had cut. When we had got the plane turned Loftus held Dan in his arms in the forward cockpit. And it was only mid-afternoon of that age-long day when, after a taxi of at least four miles, I came into a reach of water that let me get into the air.

By the time we moored at the mahogany landing I had made up my mind what my next move was to be. I hardly waited to make sure that Corliss was comfortable before going out to the mouth of the Tambos trail on a scout of my own.

The necessity of getting Dan Corliss out of the

jungle had temporarily thrown me off of my intended errand to the Choco village. This would have been a serious matter if we had been forced to travel by water; but by air the village was still only a quarter hour away, and I could reach it quickly at any time, if only I conserved my gasoline meanwhile.

Just now I was intent upon something else, something that I should have thought of before. I saw now that I had rushed off up the river without exhausting the pressing possibilities at hand. One factor of Loftus's story was easy to check up—the part about his search of the Tambos trail, just before he had come back to the clearing to engage me in the fight that had been a standstill for us both. With all my suspicion of this man, I had not troubled to verify a statement of his that needed only the use of my eyes! It was inexcusable, but I meant to make up for it now.

I picked a blade of grass, and chewed it as I entered the mouth of the trail. I walked into the shadows slowly, and stopped to wait for my eyes to adjust themselves to the lesser light of the forest.

Here Loftus overtook me.

"What are you after now?"

I mumbled, "Taking a look around."

"I've been all through here. I suppose I went into this trail two or three miles. There's nothing to it. I worked about two miles past the place where Walker began his cut, when he went to Tambos—it's very passable. But——"

"*Will* you shut your mouth!" I blazed at him.

"Well," he grumbled, "I only wanted to save you trouble."

He strolled past me where I stood chewing my straw, and wandered vaguely ahead of me in the trail.

"You get back here," I ordered him furiously. "Stay behind me, if you're going up this trail! Or, better yet, get out!"

He swung about ominously, and I saw his shoulders loosen and droop, like the muscles of a fighting animal about to go into action. It's only the catlike, nervous animals that tense before they jump. The fighting man who is both experienced and sure of his strength keeps himself loose and wary. He changed his mind, however, for he stalked past without meeting my eye, and took up a position behind me, where he stood glowering.

I moved along the trail leisurely, a few paces at a time, studying the minute indications of old leaves

and fallen bark. It was hard to get what I was after, because so little time had passed since I had tramped that trail myself. Walker, too, had left marks not distinguishable from anyone's else. I soon verified Loftus's statement that he had been in the trail that day, but I went on, dissatisfied.

Then suddenly I whirled on him, black with anger. "How many times did you walk up this trail to-day?"

"Once," said he.

"You lie!"

Once more we stood facing each other, the hate thick between us, and another battle seemed very near. But something had tamed this man, so that now he was more reasonable than I was. At last he only said, "What makes you think that?"

"One thing marks a white man in this jungle; that's his leather heels. I don't have any great flair for trailing, but I know a heel mark when I see one—and I know a fresh-crushed leaf. You'll never in God's world make me think that you stepped on both sides of this trail at once. Twice you've been up this trail within twenty-four hours; and, so help me God, I'm going to know the reason!"

His face had turned into a poker mask, partly con-

cealing even his anger, the smothered gleam of which gave him a crafty look. "I'm waiting," he said without expression.

Deliberately I turned my back on him and went on. Through those long minutes I was fully expecting him to come on to me from behind, and my ears strained for the sound of his step, catlike on the rotting rubbish of the jungle floor. He kept his distance, however, following heavy-footed a little way behind.

Then an oath was wrenched out of me, and for a moment I forgot Loftus, and the jungle, and the conflicting testimonies of the trail. I dropped to one knee, and the tears sprang to my eyes and mingled with the sweat that ran through the stubble of my beard. Fresh and sharply unmistakable in the loam I had found the imprint of a woman's heel.

In that moment Buckner Loftus could easily have got a strangle hold from behind, for I was unaware of where he was or what he was doing, until I realized that he was hanging close over me, peering down past my shoulder at the print.

"Missed it," he said, in a curious voice.

"Tambos," I muttered incredulously. All my reasoning floundered in a swirl of complete bewilderment. Suddenly all the clues I had so carefully

noted, all the constructions I had laboriously contrived to fit them—all collapsed from under me, turning to a welter of lies. Through my bewilderment one clue danced, mocking me, just beyond my reach—a fact that I had possessed and somehow forgotten. And I knew that that one small lost essential was the key to every movement of the horror that had stalked the house of mahogany.

Loftus stood staring at me, and he also seemed bewildered; but it would have taken only a very flimsy counterfeit to deceive me then. I turned and rushed past him, and heard him hammering along behind me as I ran back to the clearing. Words were pounding through my head with the blood: "I'll never forgive myself, as long as I live . . ."

Back at the river I floundered aboard my aged crate. Loftus got there in time to give me contact as I furiously swung the prop with my one good hand. She was still warm enough to catch on the first throw after contact. I slashed the mooring lines with my knife; and long before she was hot I took her lumbering into the air.

CHAPTER XXV

We picked up the Tres Gallos within twenty minutes, striking it too high; and located the village of Tambos after a ten-minute sweep downstream.

This village was one I remembered from a year before, when I had camped there overnight in the course of one of my slow river-level journeys into these forests. Its fifty huts lie in a half moon, which holds a bend of the river in its arms. Not more than half these huts are lived in at one time, however. These canoe-like people are perpetually beset by diseases which leave many of the huts empty for years, until the curse of death is forgotten.

I recalled clearly what a strange jungle city Tambos had appeared to me when I had last approached it, by water, in the shadows of a blistering evening. In the purple twilight the cone-topped grass huts had loomed immensely tall on their long wading-bird legs of bamboo, which are their defense against the rise of the jungle river. From the water's edge they rose tier on tier, looking numerous and important, until your eyes reached the wall of the forest just behind, where

dark crooked-armed trees rose a hundred, a hundred and fifty, even two hundred feet, a mighty cyclorama that dwarfed the fragile huts below.

When I had last come here, bright points of cooking fires had burned in the still twilight, between the stilt legs of the huts; and from among these a brown, nearly naked throng had gathered, to marvel at my boots and clothes. It was a curious, untouched little city from another age, impressively strange, so deep in its jungle setting.

It looked different now, from the air—no more than a straggling sprinkle of little grass cones, red-gold in the slant of the late afternoon sun. But still that woolly-faced jungle rolled away behind it, limitless mile on mile, unconquered, vast, and inscrutable. The endless rough carpet of its upper levels was capable of hiding a world unknown.

As a sense of that vastness forced itself upon me, a terrible weariness came over me, a weariness of remembered long struggles with that age-old tangle, and a profound sense of futility in the face of it now.

Landing below the village, I taxied upstream to its beach. Long forms, like dragon-headed logs, disappeared from the brown surface of the water in oily swirls as we passed over. In the village I caught a

glimpse of scurrying brown bodies, twinkling legs, and shadows merging into shadow. By the time we had beached these had vanished, leaving the village looking almost as if it had been deserted for years.

As I walked among the huts a naked child of six fled before me, making good a belated escape. The terrified eyes of a boy, probably one with a broken leg, peered at us through the slats of a hut. These were all I saw at first.

In the short time intervening since then, other planes have flown the Choco jungle, and I suppose the denizens are less appalled by them now. But at that time the Scadta Air Lines, which have shriveled Colombia's distances, were only on paper, and for all I know we were the first flying men Tambos had ever seen.

I turned my back on the bush and sat down near the river; and presently the villagers began creeping back. An old man garbed in a towel and a piece of rope came forward at last.

"Marachi," he introduced himself; then added the Spanish word for chief: "*jefe*."

"I remember you," I said in Spanish.

He admitted, without pleasure, that he recalled my previous visit. Then he asked what we wanted here,

with our bellowing sky devil. I told him as well as I could that we were friendly, wishing all his people well; and that we were hunting news of some friends, who were supposed to be here now. Had any of my people passed this way?

Marachi pretended not to understand me, and I knew that he was stalling, holding something back until he should learn more. I let him worry in silence while I studied him and the people who had now come out to cluster about us. They were of the Filipino-like race of the Choco—small and ruddy brown, wide-cheek-boned, and bowlegged.

"White man," said Marachi at last, "go back! This is not a good place. Take your sky devil and go away."

"*Cuida'o!*" I snapped at him. "We mean to find our friends here! Otherwise—this iron bird will fly over the jungle, and things will happen here!"

He took my threat impassively, though his eyes ran from one side to the other. No one but Marachi understood me; but in the throng that was now thick about us there was a stir of uneasiness gathered from my tone.

Marachi drew his old men about him and took counsel in whispers. I weighed his glances, trying to

read where we stood. There was a short glance that took in Buck and myself; an even briefer but more respectful glance at our plane; and then a long stare at the jungle behind, as if that withered old head was listening for something behind the whispers of his people, behind the jungle itself.

He stepped forward again reluctantly. "White men," he repeated in broken Spanish, "go back. We don't want you here. That is final."

"Why?"

"Go back," he insisted. "There are things going on in this jungle. They aren't your business. They have nothing to do with us here, either. But there will be trouble of many kinds if you stay, or if you go on."

"We will not," I told him.

He stood staring at me, a black emotion coming into his wrinkled face that may have been anger, or horror, or fear. But as he stood pondering me, a sort of wonderment spread over and concealed that other darker emotion, as if he could not believe that so much folly could go with such an equipment of material magic. He was prepared, however, to believe us common clay as long as we were on the ground.

One of the old men exchanged a glance with him; and Marachi spoke in an undertone, in Choco.

"Neither of these outlanders will ever leave this jungle alive."

A toneless, conversational comment: but it sent a cold chill up and down my back, wet with perspiration as I was.

Probably that was why I now noticed that the women and children had drawn back, and that all those small brown men so close about us had their weapons in their hands. Not that they were a fearful sight. The bows of the Choco are slender toys, and the long blowguns of bamboo look silly and unwieldy, dwarfing the bowlegged little men that shoulder them. Even the long spears have a slender, tentative look.

I knew that many of those flint-hard bamboo points might be tipped with deadly poison; but a white man has a hard time taking that kind of weapon seriously. My patience broke, and I laughed in the old chief's face.

"Tell 'em we'll hop in the crate and come down on 'em in a cloud of fur," Loftus prompted me. "These bucks know something!"

"You think they do?"

"You know they do! I think we've landed in the right ant heap. Lay down the law!"

It was not as easy as that. The danger was of scaring these people into the bush before we had learned anything from them.

I thought of Jane Corliss's face, and pictured that city-born American girl alone—or not sufficiently alone—somewhere in this black fever choke of the jungle, and I angered. Beyond earshot into the jungle tangle was the same as beyond discovery forever—unless we could worm information from these brown monkey-men.

My hope had been, as I swept down on to the surface of the river, that Jane Corliss would come running to me across the narrow mud flat as I beached. Yet I believed that she had come here.

"Where is the white woman?" I asked bluntly.

"White woman, *homb'e?*"

"Where is she?" I demanded again, advancing upon him.

The brown men swayed, and an insolent stripling leveled an iron wood spear from under Marachi's elbow, holding me back.

Loftus now took a hand, stepping past me. He laid hold of the lance, easy and slow, and the man at the other end was lifted off his feet. When the owner of the spear dropped clear, Loftus broke the weapon in

two with his hands—an incredible feat, considering the strength of that wood. The ring of natives dropped back.

"For God's sake," I begged of him, "be careful what you do!"

"I know how to handle these red niggers," Loftus raged. "If I could get my hands on that old one——"

"I'd much rather kill you," said I, "than have that happen. If it comes to that, the death of one white man at the hands of another will be an almost insuperable handicap to me here. But I tell you, if you choose to hamper me, as you're beginning to, I'd much rather kill you than not."

To raise my voice to him would have been to lose caste with the Choco rivermen. However, Loftus chose to believe me, for he dropped back sullenly.

"Well," he wanted to know, "what are you going to do?"

That was something I had not decided. By this time I was supremely puzzled. I knew that Jane had entered the trail to this place. And she had had time enough to reach Tambos from the house of mahogany, if nothing had befallen her on the way. Yet I knew that nothing lived in this jungle that had not heard the roar of our engine as we crossed from

the Estrago, and I knew that if she was near Tambos she would have signaled me if it had been physically possible. Apparently what Marachi said was true—at least to the extent that Jane was not here now.

That she had not been here and gone was less certain. I wasted half a minute in speculation as to what ominous occurrence in the jungle had disturbed these river people and put them on their guard.

"One of two things," I said. "She's been here and gone down the river; or she's still between here and the Estrago, either on the trail or lost near it."

"We don't know even that she is alive," said Buck dully. Then suddenly he began lathering again. "Search the damned huts," he raged; "we'll soon see if she's here, or has been here!"

"I have a better way." I turned on Marachi, who waited, his nervous brown men all around him. "The trail to the Estrago," I said in Spanish: "do you use it?"

It took some trouble to get him to understand what trail I meant, but he answered at last. "We don't use it. It is an unlucky trail. Better for us if the jungle takes it, and it is never opened again. We want to see no more *carretas!* But a mad white man came through

it, some days ago. He went back again. I tell you, he is the only one who has been here."

I knew he referred to Walker.

"Then what do you mean when you talk about something going on in the jungle?"

"*Homb'e*, I didn't mean anything. What always goes on in the jungle? One animal eats another, and white men get fever. I know nothing that concerns you."

"It'll be better for you——" I began.

He babbled off into his original set speech, half in Spanish and half in Choco: "White man, go away! This is not a good place . . ." There was no end to it.

"Take me to the Estrago trail, the old *carreta* trail," I ordered him. "If I find nothing there, then I'll go. I promise you that."

He studied me for a moment, then silently turned and pushed through the throng of his people. The crowd drew back as I followed him, and farther back yet from Buck Loftus who came behind me.

I recognized the trail mouth to which Marachi took me by the grass-grown ruts of the wheels. Slowly I entered it, as I had at its other end. But my purpose was different now. I knew what I was looking for,

and my evidence when I had it must be utterly conclusive. Therefore, I chose a dozen yards of trail where the ground was fairly clear, yet the thickets impenetrable. Buck Loftus stood, a permanent barrier to the curious natives, while I prospected this strip on hands and knees.

The late afternoon light was fading when I was done, and so was I. I think I could have told you, when I finished there, exactly where Walker had set his feet, going and coming, and what animals had crossed the night before. I was certain that nothing so clear as the print of a small heel could have escaped me in that narrow jungle passage.

"Buck, she has not come here. . . ."

He stood fumbling uncertainly at his stubbled jaw with an immense hand. "We'll comb back through the trail," he decided.

I nodded. "We'll eat first though. It's a long way."

My heart was as heavy as a concrete block as I sat cross-legged beside that jungle river, waiting for Marachi's women to bring us meat. More than ever I was baffled by this last and most heart-breaking disappearance of all. Ahead of us was a night of slow, inching travel through a trail that was bad enough by day. But my dread of that trail was not of its

length, but of what we might find in it—if we found anything at all.

Through day after day, night after night, a living horror had walked among us, taking one after another of us, until there remained only Loftus and I, and the half-recovered wreck of Dan Corliss. Not once had we frustrated that horror, not once so much as touched its shadow. It had proved itself indomitable, an unconquerable thing with the power and stealth of the jungle itself. And now ahead of me I saw a new and final defeat, a defeat that I did not wish to survive.

I would search for that lost girl while life was in me; but I was certain now that I would come to the end of the trail too late. I cannot describe to you the steady grinding punishment of my despairing grief. I suspected Buckner Loftus, the ego-swollen brute of a man who broke ironwood in his hands. A faint shade more of suspicion and I would have gone against him once more, determined to have the truth or the life out of him this time. But a haunting inhibition held me back, for my new disbelief in my own reasoning was complete at last.

Mental effort was no longer possible to me. Foolish words and pictures jumbled through my mind, dis-

connected and without meaning. I hid my face in my arms, submitting to my utter confusion, in an effort to capture a moment's rest.

And then, while my mind relaxed its hag-ridden searching, the light came through, and the lost clue came back to me, the one forgotten fact that was a key to everything else.

It was those words in my mind, first: "Dark . . . darker . . . darkest . . . darkest under the light"—the words Lucretia had written to me as she died. Then the pain in my broken hand made me look to its bandage; and as I tore away a tatter of sleeve I suddenly saw what I had done. Ever since the death of Lucretia I had *carried with me* the one small essential clue, so near to me I could not see it, so obvious that it was forgotten.

I solved the mystery of the house of mahogany as I sat there, beaten, on the Tambos beach. And if you think that is a boast, I will tell you this, as I knew it in that moment, and know it now: all the tragedy that had transpired after the death of Blackburn—or at least after the death of Lucretia—can be laid only to the slowness of my own wits. And even in my latest act—my flight to Tambos—I saw that I had lost one, and perhaps two, lives more.

I sprang up and went splashing through the shallows to my plane, yelling to Loftus!

"For God's sake come on!"

He came lumbering after me, his face dazed. "What's the matter with you? Are you crazy?"

"Swing the prop! Swing it, will you? He'll go back! He's certain to go back! God help me, I should have known it long ago!"

"I'm going to comb that trail," he told me stubbornly.

"I tell you, she isn't there! I know! She isn't there —unless it's too late. . . ."

How the minutes dragged, while I closed my eyes and counted to myself, waiting for the engine to warm up, slowly, slowly. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

Our floats touched the Estrago at dusk, and I brought up against the landing itself. There I left the engine idling, to hold her upstream against the timbers, and dropped overboard, headlong into the black water. As I floundered ashore I imagined that a small choking cry came from the cypress, and I called Jane's name; but I heard no answer under the engine's racket, and I went up the path to the house of mahogany at a sprint. Then I stood dripping and swaying within that haunted main room at last, peering dimly at the two figures that were there, gray in the dying light.

"Corliss? Are you all right?"

"Well, Son," came the thin faint voice, "I'm tolerable." I had outraced death once at least—if the work was not already done.

Corliss sat in an easy chair, with a blanket over his knees, in spite of the great heat. Near him one other sat, very limp and tired, his clothes looking like so many rags; and that other was Philip Heneshaw.

"Oh, Mr. Macgregor—" Heneshaw's voice was faltering—"if only you had come before. . . ."

"Corliss," said I, "I must speak to this man alone."

I did not wait for his assent, but took Phil Heneshaw by one arm and guided him outside. Once out of earshot of Dan Corliss I turned on him savagely.

"Where's Jane?" I demanded.

His eyes wavered up to mine, weary, despairing, and old, then dropped again. I seized him by the throat of the shirt, and forced him to look me in the eye. "*Where is she?*" I demanded again.

"How can I tell you?" he quavered. "After Loftus left, I think she must have gone mad with the loneliness and the horror of this place. She ran off into the jungle last night. I went after her and brought her back. Not half an hour ago we arrived at the clearing again. But at the edge of the clearing she broke away from me—I was helping her along—and ran for the river. . . . Poor Dan! I haven't the courage to tell him that——"

"If you're lying to me——"

"No; if only I were! I would give my life for hers. . . . She flung herself into the river, and though I searched with all my heart, I never saw her again.

Only, in the water, I thought I saw one of those hideous long swirls. . . ."

I dropped him, and he almost fell to the ground. To believe him would have been impossible except for my memory of that choking cry, half heard, half imagined, under the engine's roar. I went stumbling down to the landing, the jungle in a mad whirl about me. I was at the edge of a black abyss; I could not conceive of continuance in a world which did not somewhere contain the beautiful slender body of Jane Corliss, tender-eyed and vivid.

What I meant to do, I did not know. Something vague was in my mind, I think about taxiing the river in search of any trace that might be left of Jane. Anyway, I turned now to my plane, like a blinded animal taking to cover. Once more I plunged into the jungle river.

As the treacherous black waters closed over my head, blood-warm and faintly acrid, I was thinking of those fourteen-foot armored brutes that were usually waiting there—lying in shoals, like as not, deep under the water; but for once in my life I felt no fear of the drag-under clutch of great jaws. Gladly would I have met the end of all things, there under the dark river, letting the jungle waters close over my tor-

ment. But this was not my time. I swam two strokes with leaden arms, and mechanically clambered upward to the cockpit of my plane, heavy and slow.

There was no meaning for me in the familiar clattering thunder of my engine, no meaning in the jungle, no significance in the movements of my hands. With the loss of Jane Corliss all light and beauty had passed out of the world forever, leaving only a sad desolate wreckage, ugly, imbecile, and insane. . . . I hooked a dead arm over the cockpit combing.

Then—a rush of bewildered emotion swept me, for Jane was there. She was there, alive and real in the cockpit of my plane, her dark hair wet about her lovely throat. The jungle thorns had torn her garments almost as badly as they had my own, marking her flesh, and across her white shoulders those ragged dragonhead palms flung a dark shadow, like a bruise; yet in the twilight she was radiant with the life that I thought had gone out of the world.

My shaking hands almost lost their grip on the combing, tears ran foolishly through the wet stubble of my beard, and I could not speak. Then she was in my arms, all the recovered world was in my arms, warm and alive.

Loftus came scaling up, with the look of a man who

wants to believe his eyes and ears, but cannot; and Jane managed to smile at him, though she clung to me still. I had forgotten Loftus, but I know now he must have been close behind me all the time, even when I was shaking Heneshaw's story out of him. And I know that that moment must have ended a phase in Loftus's life, for I saw the light that had come into his eyes go out again before he grinned—and it was a weak and sickly grin, game and steady, but with nothing overbearing in it now.

I said, "We found your father, and he's all right, Jane."

"Oh, *is he?* Is he here?"

"Yes; we'll take you to him in a minute."

"Is Heneshaw there?" Jane shuddered. "Joe, that man is mad! I was afraid to stay with him, and tried to get through to Tambos, but he came after me, and I came back with him, to keep him quiet. Then I heard the blessed roar of your engine, coming over the jungle from far away, and I broke away from him. I ran and dived into the river, and hid in the mangroves, to wait for you. Joe, if you knew how terrible it's been here——"

"It's over now. Wait here, child. I'm going up to the house." I cut the engine.

"Then I'm going with you."

"No, you must wait. There's something I have to do."

I slid into the water, and struggled ashore. In my anxiety over Jane I had forgotten the danger that I knew hung over Dan Corliss; but now I went back to the house at a run, Loftus close behind me.

In the living room Heneshaw was fumbling in his desk; and Dan Corliss, propped in a chair like the living skeleton he was, was shaking something in his fist. He was making a motion to toss it into his mouth when I plunged across the room and seized his wrist. Dan's hand opened, and two quinine capsules dropped to the floor. I picked them up and whirled upon the old man at the desk.

"And what's this, exactly?" I demanded of him.

He turned to me with a vague, puzzled face. "Why, quinine, Macgregor; quinine. If ever a man needed quinine, I would say it was Dan Corliss now."

"It seems to me," said I slowly, "that you are not looking quite well yourself, Heneshaw. A touch of quinine——"

"Oh, yes—surely. I just took ten grains."

"And now, ten grains more," I said softly.

"You mean——"

"These," I pressed him inexorably.

The blood went out of his face, leaving it hideous; but he did not give up, yet.

"Certainly not," he said, turning away abruptly. He pretended to be searching for something in his desk. "Too much quinine makes me ill."

I tossed the capsules on the desk, whipped out my automatic, and tapped his elbow with it, so that he spun sharply to face me. "Your quinine, Heneshaw."

He started to reach for a medicine bottle, but I stopped him. "These—and these only!" I insisted again, indicating the capsules I had taken from Corliss's hand.

"Or else——?" he almost whispered.

"I'll let you have it where you stand," I told him slowly.

He studied me for a long moment, his face looking like a living death. "Yes, I believe you would," he decided at last. He turned to Loftus. "Are you going to permit——"

I did not look at Buck's face, so do not know what Heneshaw saw there; but his voice died in his throat.

"When we were searching for poison the other night," I said, "you volunteered to test the quinine

capsules at the risk of your own life. You aren't the man, Heneshaw, to commit suicide for love of anyone but yourself. And I thought it extremely curious that you should want to risk the test—unless you knew already which was quinine and which was something else."

Suddenly Heneshaw's thin lips drew back from his teeth. That grimace could have been a leering grin, a snarl, or an expression of terror. Whatever it was, I have never seen so unnatural a distortion of a human face. I wondered if Jane had seen the same madness come into his countenance, and as I thought of what she had perhaps been through, it was true that I would have shot him readily enough.

Heneshaw spoke in a strange dry voice just below a falsetto. "I choose the gun. Go ahead and shoot, you fool!"

"Sit down," I told him; and when he had obeyed I holstered my automatic. "I want witnesses to this," I went on. "Mr. Heneshaw, what was it you discovered in the Choco?"

He was cooler, now; his voice was steady and ironic when he answered.

"It'll do you no good," he said contemptuously.

"It'll be found out, surely; the greatest wealth the world has ever known certainly cannot much longer be hid. But it will be split in ten thousand pieces, little fortunes for little men. I was the one man who could have held it together as one—one gigantic, world-wide force. . . ."

"He's got the empire bug," said Dan's faint voice. "You know what he thinks? He thinks the whole continental divide is one big oil anticline. Oh, I told you that? Well, he may not know it, but the idea ain't original with him. It's a myth; crops up every once in a while down here. Gosh, if that was so, and one man got hold of it, it'd be a power all right. He'd make a monkey out of Standard Oil and Dutch Shell throwed together! One man with a strangle hold on the ports and mountain passes—there's never been the equal of the underholt he'd have on the whole darn world. It's all in them little books of his," he explained with a wave at the desk.

"So you broke into those," said Heneshaw without emotion.

"It's my business to know what I need to know," said Corliss.

"And mine," said Heneshaw. "Or once it was. . . . You knew I suspected you, Corliss; and that was why

you tried to confuse me by making a feint toward Tambos. As if anything could happen on the Estrago without my knowledge."

"And that was why you were trading punk rum to the Choco tribes," I prompted; "a sort of spy system?"

He did not answer that, directly. "No one or two men could be allowed to stand in the way of the power that lies under this jungle," said Heneshaw. "Not even you, Dan. In my hands it would have been a force of world-wide destiny; and it was almost in my hands. The intricacies of Colombian law . . ." His voice trailed off.

"In short," said I, "it took time and a lot of subterfuge to try to get a key grip on the whole of the Choco!"

"Too much time," Heneshaw admitted. "If only I had had a little more!"

"That brings us to the blue shirt," I said. "Where is it?"

I had expected to startle him, but he seemed to be past that. He smiled dryly. All fear, if not all comprehension, of his situation appeared to have gone out of the man, as if he were already detached from the world. He tapped his belt.

I stepped forward and ripped open his shirt, disclosing a coarse dark fabric wrapped tightly about his body, like a sash.

"And what does that mean?" Loftus broke in.

"It means," said I, "that dark clothing is an advantage to those who wish to move unseen in the dark."

CHAPTER XXVII

LEANING back, I closed my eyes. The pain in my broken hand was trying to divert my mind, but I wanted to render my full indictment while I had two witnesses, and Heneshaw himself.

"By your information system, which you built of Indians and liquor, you learned that O'Hare had left the country. He was the only man who could translate Blackburn's notes, and he would be inaccessible indefinitely. Therefore you poisoned Blackburn's quinine; the field book by itself you did not fear. And you thought Blackburn had discovered the great anticline?"

"He'd found it, all right," Heneshaw said.

"Blackburn, having taken only one capsule, however, did not die at once. You were afraid he would know who did for him, and communicate it: you had given him the quinine yourself, perhaps? You stopped his voice forever with the head of the Indian doll, as a man would cork a bottle.

"You poisoned Lucretia because she had discov-

ered the flaw in your alibi. Walker you did for exactly in the same manner as Blackburn, because you feared what he knew. Harmon you killed because——"

"Harmon is alive," Heneshaw supplied unexpectedly.

"I think not. The abandoned launch——"

"Do you think he'd try to run away down the river paddling a launch?" said Heneshaw. "He made a dicker to be taken off in a canoe; that was when you caught him talking Choco with that native. The Choco riverman waited for him. Harmon was here under false pretenses, and with his bad record behind him he was afraid he'd be convicted of these—irregularities. He was wanted anyway, I think; so he cast the launch adrift to let fools think he was dead, while he went up the river, hoping to cut over to the Pacific coast later."

"Your spy system seems to work," I said dryly.

"You give me too little credit," he answered. "I planned his escape for him, though he didn't know that. He was in my way, and he was a coward. So I simply supplied the opportune canoeman—with the smooth, well-oiled result you see."

"If this is true," I said, "it reduces your murders to three. Or perhaps you have suicide suggestions con-

cerning those? And an explanation of how Dan Corliss almost died of poison in the jungle?"

He was silent.

"Loftus—you had a native lure him into the jungle on a false message from Corliss. Did you fear Loftus, too? Or did you want to be alone with Jane?"

The measure of the man's madness is in his next words.

"I meant well by Jane. I decided long ago that I would marry her, after Lucretia was—gone."

For a moment all three of us were silenced, so obvious was the insanity in that.

"Why, you——" began Dan Corliss, struggling to sit up.

"Shut up a minute," said Loftus to Corliss. "When did you find all this out, Joe?"

"At Tambos. You also tried to poison me, I imagine, Heneshaw."

"It was too late," he said, his voice very faint and low. "It is a bitter thing, a bitter thing, to have a great power all but in your hands, and then to be frustrated by a common fool."

"Fool?" said Loftus.

"I had heard that Macgregor had died in a crash at Laguna," said Heneshaw. "My runner evidently

lied. The moment I saw Macgregor's plane above the jungle to-day I knew that there was an end to the magnificent destiny of the Choco.

"I made one mistake," he went on. "When I did away with Walker I eliminated a smart man, at a time when I should have eliminated a fool."

His eyes rested on me glassily, like the eyes of a cuttlefish. "A fool with something to conceal needs to fear intelligent men," he went on. "An intelligent man in the same position needs to fear only a fool. It is always the village idiot who solves the magician's trick. A fool is immune to logic, and blunders straight on through, blind to the indications of the trail."

I wasn't interested in his philosophy. "That blowgun dart," I bore down on him—"that was an afterthought. Is that right?"

Heneshaw's face twisted in the ghost of a smile. "Certainly not. The thinking man has no afterthoughts. Emergencies may arise, and he meets them, but those are not afterthoughts. The poison was new, and largely untested. But I knew that the result would resemble no known disease. I had a choice of making it look like snake bite or a Choco dart poison. The latter seemed the more plausible.

"The use of the doll's head, on the other hand,

was an example of the meeting of an emergency. Blackburn—— But why should I go into it?"

"Blackburn was dying too slowly, and too noisily," I supplied. "He gave you some bad moments, I should imagine! So when you went out to implant the dart you took the doll's head with you. But this involved a certain risk of discovery—a risk which, because of your high opinion of your own intelligence, you enjoyed, rather than feared. Then, when poor Harry's last struggles carried him a few yards from the tree, you conceived your second line of defense—the scratches in the bark, which you made with the curve of your knife blade. For you already knew that Loftus had broken nails."

"And that Harmon's were very heavy," Heneshaw murmured. Almost, that aged spirit of evil seemed to be relishing this exposure of his methods. His slow, incongruous smile gave an eery sense of madness to the proceeding so that a new sweat came to my forehead as I went on with my probing into abnormality.

"Walker was the key," he said now. "From the unknown native, his suspicion turned to me, because I had moved about that night. This suited me, because the first suspicion later became my alibi. From me, Walker's suspicion turned to you, because of the

worthless field book; then to Loftus, because of his broken fingernail; then to Harmon, because he was here under suspicious circumstances, and because the clues I had planted fitted him best of all. Last of all, it would have returned to you, and fixed upon you—after Walker learned that Harmon was a coward. All this was as I foresaw: see how intricately I led the mind of that clever man! Then—I made the mistake of going a step too far."

"This man isn't human," Loftus burst out. "Except that I suspected Walker, in place of myself, what you've just heard is the exact course of my own reasoning!"

"Yes; your logic almost saved me, Loftus, and with me the Choco. But you were too slow. If only I had conserved Walker——"

"You feared Walker saw through your game?"

"No. But the temptation to take him out from under the noses of you all was too much for me. He was a parasite on society—a weasel—and deserved his death. It was a good work. But I should have preserved him for my own use. At the time, I told myself that Loftus was intelligent enough to serve my ends. I see now that this was deliberate self-delusion. Loftus was too slow; and Macgregor, the

fool who was to be convicted in my place, came blundering and crashing through to the truth. . . ."

"Why did you put a bullet through your sun glasses, when you sunk the launch?"

"No one would ask that but a fool."

"I ask it," Loftus declared.

"That was my sixth and last line of defense—the loophole if everything else failed. It would have established my death—to intelligent men. I could have lived with the Indians until it was time to go away, and return with a new identity, and a new name. Ah, if Macgregor had only had brains! Everything was taken care of—everything—except the blunderings of a fool who would believe nothing, not even the evidences of his own eyes."

"I still don't see where I went wrong," said Loftus. "Why, damn it——"

"Can't you see it?" I said. "An empire-crazy old man, hermited in the jungle heat with a nagging woman from whom he was estranged——"

"Yes, yes, I see all that," said Loftus impatiently. "But, when Harry died, this man was in bed! I saw him come out from under his mosquito net with my own eyes. And Jane, and Walker—everybody swore he had not moved from that bed after one-thirty.

He has a cot that not only pops, but screeches like a fiend let loose——"

"That was it exactly. Did you ever think that this one cot is the only metal thing in this house that is not oiled? Not even the phonograph needles are rusted, over there in the case, and you never saw them unrusted anywhere else in this climate."

"That was why you couldn't get away from popping that cot, was it?" Loftus said. "But, still you found nothing until we were at Tambos——"

"I knew two other things," I said. "I told you about them, I think: that Lucretia found something revealing in this room; and that I found this strand of blue threads"—I showed it to them—"in a cuff of one of her dresses, where it could hardly be expected, normally."

"But at Tambos——"

"What I found at Tambos was the one clue that was with me all the time, if I had not forgotten it. What Heneshaw says is true: I am a fool."

I held out my throbbing left arm, and showed them what was left of a tiny scratch. "While I was looking under his bed I scratched my arm on a nail that had worked up out of the matting. Lucretia also looked under the bed—for her ring which she had dropped

—the morning she terrified herself by finding a clue. A scratch, a thread concealed by Lucretia—and where is his alibi?"

"You mean——"

"As he has told us, he meant to plant a dart in Harry Blackburn's neck after Blackburn had died of poison—thus throwing suspicion upon a native. But first, to make his alibi secure, he got up and moved about noisily, so that several of us would be sure to hear him return to his squeaky bed without going out of the house. This was intended to call our attention to that noisy spring, and establish his inability to move about quietly.

"He almost overdid it; for he heard Jane stir, as if she was awake, and moved out on to the gallery where she could *see* who it was that moved so noisily and innocently about the house, and could swear that it was really he who went back to his squawking cot without leaving the house. The fact that she turned her face to the wall without seeing whether he went out or not almost did for him—but my own testimony about the noiseless figure came to his rescue.

"Having established his blundering innocence to his own satisfaction, he returned to his cot, and got

under the net all right—but instead of getting into his bed he slid *under* it, popping the telltale spring by pulling it downward. Afterward he could get out of the net and in again without touching the bed at all; and in the dim light, as we struck matches to light the lamps, we saw only his figure billowing up out of the net, as if he had been in bed!"

"You see," said Heneshaw in his dry, bitter voice, "you see how intelligence is helpless in the face of a fool, who misreads every clue, blunders ahead against the evidences of his eyes, and goes crawling like an idiot under suspicionless furniture to destroy a world force—an empire!—by clumsily scratching his arm. . . ."

Heneshaw got up and went to his desk. I watched him narrowly as once more he fumbled among his papers. Suddenly I sprang toward him, across the room.

Buck Loftus caught my wrist—the one made painful by my broken hand, which enabled him to hold me back. "Let him alone," he growled in my ear. "Don't you know justice when you see it?"

"But——"

"There isn't a court in the Western Hemisphere that would convict him of anything worse than

loitering, on the evidence you've got! What have you to show but a chain of——"

"A chain of admitted truths!"

"Such as are worthless in any court of law!"

When Heneshaw turned away from the desk the capsules I had tossed there were gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THAT was a sombre and terrible night. It is an ugly thing to watch a man die under your eyes, even though that man is a confessed murderer with a hideously twisted mind. There was no living excuse for trying to save his life, since he had a choice between dangerous insanity and the hell-on-earth that must follow a rational comprehension of what he had done. As a matter of fact, after a long argument, we did try. But Heneshaw clamped his teeth against the emetics we attempted, and by the time Loftus forced his jaws it was too late.

Philip Heneshaw died within the hour, swiftly, as Lucretia had died. We were unable to administer antidotes because we did not know, nor did we ever learn, what chemical was in the last of those poisoned capsules. He steadfastly believed in his own righteousness to the last, and died with his teeth shut on the secret of the poison. I believe, however, that this secret was the only one of value that died with him.

It is true that vast power lies under the West

Jungle of the Choco; but it is a power of valuable timber and ever-yielding soil, hard-won ores, and scattered oil fields difficult to reach and a thousand times harder to exploit. No single mad empire builder is going to get that power out. When the West Jungle yields up its wealth it will be to many men and many years, and to a faith that is backed by capital and edged with engineering brains.

Once in a while, in the tropics, you can still run across the myth of the Great Anticline, under which —the myth says—there is oil enough to float the navies of the world. It is a fairy story that will last a long time, like the legend of Morgan's treasure, and the tales of the lost mines.

But of the mad dream of Philip Heneshaw there remains only a mahogany slab—the fourth marker set up in the clearing by the Estrago—and even that is already lost in the swiftly advancing tangle. It was Dan Corliss who scrawled the five words that are on that mahogany marker. Corliss had a hard ironic twist to him that he called a sense of humor. I am glad it does not appear in Jane. The inscription reads:

HENESHAW WORLD EMPIRE
(Farthest Penetration)

That is all that is left of a world power that existed only on paper and in the mind of a crazed old man—yet destroyed four lives before it had run its course.

At daybreak I had a short argument with Buck Loftus as to who was to fly out of the jungle. I was urging him to take the plane and fly Jane—and her father—to Panama, as he had wanted to do before. My luck had been immeasurable; and his own loss had been so great in the moment he had seen Jane Corliss cling to me, close in my arms, that it seemed only right that he should have the privilege of flying the girl we both loved out of the jungle at last.

He did not see it that way, however. "I'm the rear guard," he grinned. "That's about all there is left to this business; and at least you can't deny me that!" I didn't feel like denying him that or anything else he might ask; and as I shook his hand on the landing, promising to return to pick him up in a matter of hours, I was thinking that here was a man, one that I was proud to have known.

My engine roared full gun, and my crippled crate mounted gamely into the dawn, free of the river, free of the reaching fingers of those almighty trees, free of the dark clutching grip of the jungle itself. Then, with the woolly face of the jungle half a mile below,

and the river only a dark thread, the first sun struck gold across our ailerons; and Jane turned to smile back at me, with her lovely dark hair wind-whipped about her face.

I had thought that I was weary to the very soul, and that all dreams of empire and conquest would be dust in my mouth forever. But as her eyes smiled into mine all my old ambitious dreams came back with a rush; and now they were gilded with a new light: the light of empire that a man draws from a woman's eyes.

THE END

Whether you were keen enough to solve this Crime Club mystery in its early stages, or whether the author succeeded in keeping you in suspense up to the last chapter, Mastermind requests that you add to the next reader's enjoyment by remembering that—

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